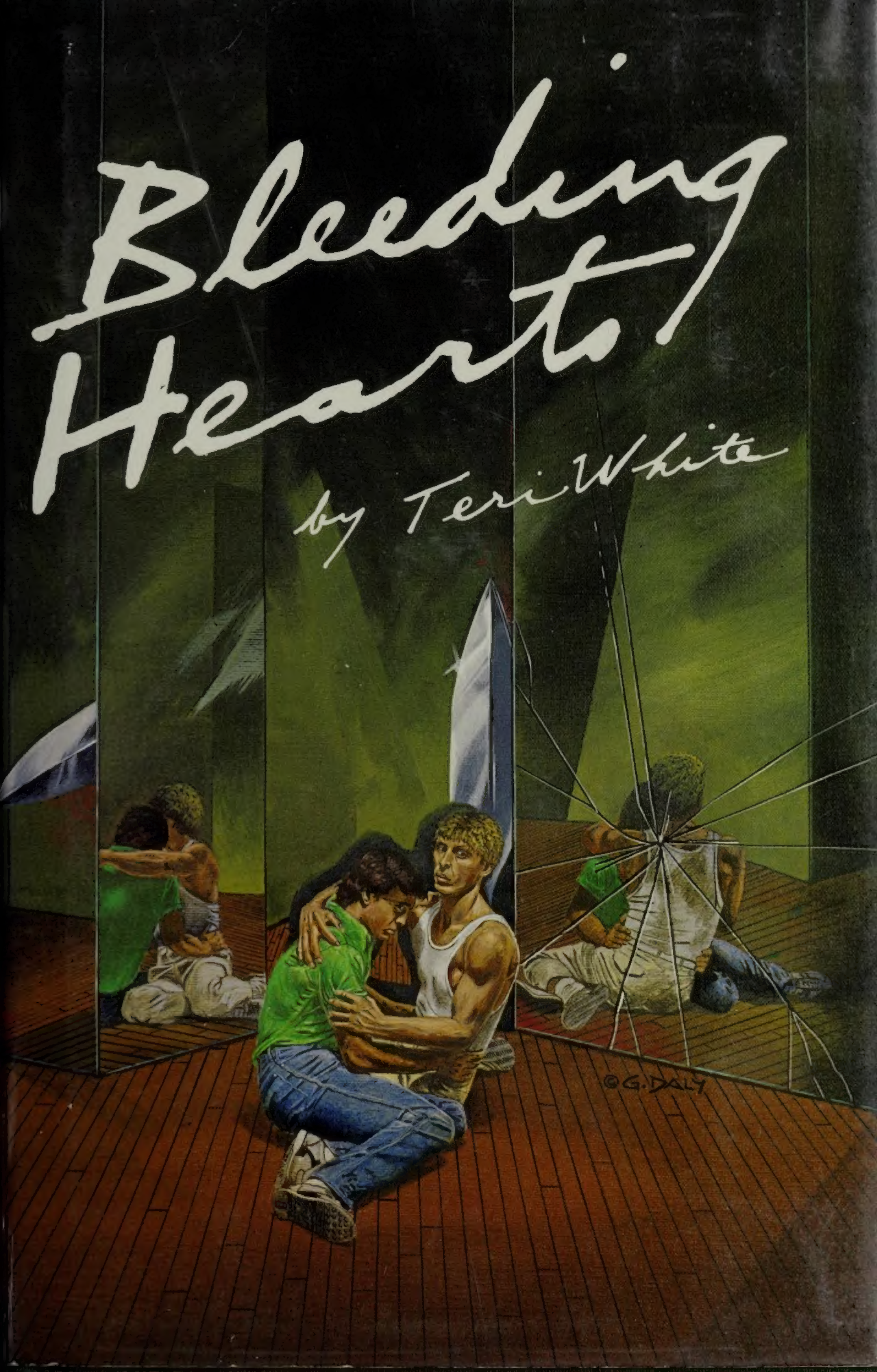
Bleeding Heart

by Teri White



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Ten years ago, Jody Hitchcock pointed his finger at his brother Tom and told the police that he was a murderer. Now, for forgiveness and to prove his love, Jody helps Tom escape from the sanitarium which has been his home since the afternoon of his arrest. Jody isn't happy about the turn his life is taking, but he does, after all, love Tom. He will stay with him—even on a murderous rampage through Los Angeles.

For Spaceman Kowalski and Blue Maguire, the two L.A. policemen assigned to the case, tracking the murderers is more than their job—it is an opportunity to prove themselves not only to their superiors, but to each other.

Spaceman is divorced, lonely, and looking for his missing son. He tries to fill the gap left by his divorce with cheap wine and a very young woman, but the emptiness remains. Maguire, thrown into partnership with Kowalski by department whimsy, seems to have everything —inherited wealth, fine clothes, a Porsche. The only real difference between the men, however, is the quality of the wine Blue drinks.

As the race to put an end to the random violence of the killers nears its end, the confrontation takes on a deadly, personal nature—it was Kowalski who arrested Tom Hitchcock and who is now the object of his murderous attention.

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FIRST EDITION

To my family

It's like a lion at the door;
And when the door begins to crack,
It's like a stick across your back;
And when your back begins to smart,
It's like a penknife in your heart;
And when your heart begins to bleed,
You're dead, and dead, and dead, indeed.

—Nursery Rhyme

Bleeding Heart

Chapter 1

He was getting out.

Tom Hitchcock had been planning this night for a very long time, waiting for it, hanging onto it as a fragile thread of hope. Now the moment was here and nothing could spoil it for him. He felt as if he could afford to savor each minute of anticipation.

Tom knew that the secret of his master plan was in its simplicity. Complicated plots, he'd decided a long time ago, just led to complications. His was the kind of mind able to grasp that basic truth, which was why he deserved to get out, while all the other idiots would stay locked up.

Survival of the fittest.

No one on the inside knew what was going to happen this night. Some of the assholes in here were so damned stupid that they blabbed their clever escape plans to all, even their stupider friends. Sooner or later word would get back to the cut-rate Nazis in charge, and bingo, another big break-out attempt would fall flat on its face.

That wasn't going to happen to him. Tom never let slip even the slightest hint of what he was going to do. It was pretty simple for him to keep the secret, of course, because he didn't have any friends to spill the beans to. After almost ten years spent within the walls of this place, the last three in the minimum security ward, he was as alone as he'd been on the day they locked him up.

There was only one person in the whole universe that Tom Hitchcock trusted, and that person was waiting for him on the outside.

Tom went into supper just as he did every other evening, although his stomach was feeling sort of queasy. There couldn't be any change at all in his routine or attitude; anything like that might alert the shrinks that something was up. They had their sneaky ways of reading people, even him sometimes. So he sat for what would be the last time in the steamy cafeteria, with its dirty green walls and damp smells, and shoveled the meal into his mouth.

He ate meat loaf, canned peas, and tapioca pudding with the same lack of interest as always.

When the meal was finally over, he even forced himself to parade into the dayroom with several others to watch the television. They took a vote and everybody wanted to see the same thing for a change, the Clint Eastwood movie. But the bitch of a nurse checked the Forbidden Viewing list and found *Dirty Harry* there, so that was out. They ended up with *Love Boat.*

Tom thought it was a dumb show, made even worse because much of the hour was peppered with comments from members of the group, mostly dealing with how much they'd like to get into the pants of the blonde broad. It was always the same with those jerks. Tom sat silently through the whole program, not wanting the others to see how disgusted he was by their words. They had no respect for themselves or others.

But then he decided: To hell with all these creeps and crazies anyway. Before long, Tom Hitchcock would be just a memory around here. Or maybe more than that; maybe he'd be a legend.

When the show finally ended, it was almost time for lights out. Tom headed for his room quickly, needing to use the john. It was about the tenth time of the day. Nerves, he knew. Yet he also knew that there wasn't a damned thing to be nervous about. The careful planning he'd done insured that nothing could go wrong.

It was thirty minutes before the night nurse showed up with his bedtime medication. He pretended to swallow the brightly colored capsules, just as he'd been doing for months. When the nurse was gone, he added the pills to his secret stash, which also included a couple of filled hypodermic syringes he'd managed to lift from the medications cart once.

Another hour passed before things were quiet on the floor. Tom, still wearing his khaki pants, was in bed, covered by a thin sheet, when the aide, Lang, made his final room check. Tom kept his eyes closed and his breathing even. As soon as the door closed again, he slid from the bed. The adrenaline was flowing through his body much too fast, and he took a couple of deep breaths to stop the slight shaking in his hands.

A faint light leaked in from beneath the door, and in the pale glow it created Tom crouched to pull the knife from its hiding place behind the dresser. He tested the blade lovingly and smiled.

He was ready to leave the room. This part had all been rehearsed so many times that the late-night hallway was a familiar place to him. He knew just who on the staff would be where at any given moment. Timing was the most crucial thing in an operation like this one. Being in just the right spot at the right second.

As he had expected, the door to the employee lounge was locked. The lock was such a shoddy piece of equipment, though, that it took him only an instant to snap it open. He stepped into the empty room, closing the door again, hearing the lock click into place once more.

There was a large metal wardrobe in one corner of the room, where the aides and nurses hung their jackets and things. Between the wardrobe and the wall was a niche just large enough for Tom's purposes.

The wait seemed much longer that the twenty minutes he knew it was. Lang left at the same time every night.

Routine. It would be the downfall of mankind. At last Tom heard the door open again, and then footsteps approaching the wardrobe. He tensed, holding the knife more firmly in his left hand.

Hangers clattered as Lang reached into the closet to hang up the white lab coat and pull out something else. The wardrobe door clanged closed. Lang had just donned a light windbreaker when Tom made his move. The knife was at Lang's throat before he could react.

"Shh," Tom cautioned. Then he smiled. "I wouldn't like to cut you by accident," he said politely.

Lang's eyes darted from side to side, dark pools in his suddenly pale face.

Tom edged out of his hiding place, wrapping an arm tightly around Lang; the point of the knife just pricked lightly at the skin of his neck. "You won't go all stupid on me, will you, buddy?"

Lang opened his mouth as if to say something, but the extra pressure Tom exerted on the knife made him close it again. He just shook his head very slightly.

"Good boy. Now listen up. You and me, we're gonna take a little walk right down the hall to my room. No noise. Nothing, you understand? Because if anything goes wrong, you'll get hurt. Hurt bad. What've I got to lose by cutting you, right?"

Lang jerked his head once in mute understanding.,

They moved out of the lounge, still locked together in the macabre embrace. They were almost of a size, of course; that was an important part of the plan. Also, Lang's hair, like Tom's, was black and curly. He had waited a long time for someone like Lang to come along.

The hallway was empty, although they could hear soft night voices coming from the nurses' station. As they walked in a sidewise crab style, the point of the knife never wavered.

The journey seemed to take a century at least, but finally

they reached his room. Feeling safe again, Tom allowed himself a small sigh of relief. He switched the lamp on. "Lay down on the floor," he ordered. "Spread-eagled."

Lang obeyed. It helped the plan that he was a coward, Tom thought. But then most people were.

Tom knelt next to him. "Listen up again. I want you to undress. You might be thinking about trying something. And you might even be able to fuck up my plans. That would make you a hero, probably." He poked the knife into Lang's ribcage. "But you'd be a dead hero, I promise. William Lang would be one dead motherfucker, because I'd kill you before anybody else could get in here. Do you believe what I'm saying?"

Lang nodded.

"Good. Now you just stay right where you are and get those clothes off."

Lang began to wriggle out of shoes, pants, jacket, and shirt. His desperate gaze never left Tom's face. He didn't look at the knife even once. In moments, he was still again, clad now only in pale blue briefs and white athletic socks. His Giants baseball cap, which he seemed always to be wearing, on or off duty, had fallen to the floor. Tom reached over with one hand and removed the man's glasses. Then he pushed everything safely out of the way.

The knife blade grazed the front of the briefs lightly. "You can keep those on. See what a nice guy I am?"

"Yeah," Lang said in a hoarse whisper.

"Yeah what?"

"Yeah, you're a nice guy."

Tom smiled at Lang and then with one swift gesture, cut the man's throat. Blood spurted and he pulled away quickly. He'd forgotten how much blood a human being had inside. Lang was still looking at him, bewildered. Finally, his body gave one terrible shudder, and Lang died with a soft gurgling noise.

Tom didn't have a chance to congratulate himself on

how well things were going so far. Timing, timing. He hoisted Lang's body and dumped it into the bed, facing the wall. Blood made a dark trail across the floor, but that couldn't be helped. When the sheet was pulled high enough, all that could be seen of the dead man was a thatch of tangled dark hair.

Still moving quickly but calmly, Tom pulled off his pants and used them to wipe up some of the blood. It was a lousy cleaning job, but he reassured himself by remembering that it wouldn't have to stand a close inspection until morning. By that time, he'd be long gone.

If his luck held.

He went into the bathroom and washed carefully, leaving the bloody towel and pants in a pile on the floor. Returning to the other room, he donned Lang's slacks, red knit shirt with the little fox on the front, and sneakers. The clothes fit well enough, although Lang had about ten pounds on him. Tom added the navy windbreaker, the baseball cap, and finally the tinted aviator glasses. That idiot Lang had made it all so simple. It was almost as if he were asking for something like this to happen.

But the easy part was over now.

Tom retrieved his hidden drug stash, shoving the plastic bag into the windbreaker pocket. The supply might come in very handy later. If nothing else, he could always sell the shit.

The knife went into the other pocket.

He glanced at the cheap alarm clock sitting on the dresser. Right on schedule. After one more glance around, he turned off the light and left the crummy little room forever.

The shoes, he discovered immediately, were a little too small, but he forced himself to walk naturally, ignoring the twinges of pain in his toes. There was, as always, a paperback book shoved into the left rear pocket of Lang's jeans. Tom tugged at the book until it slid out. He opened

it at random and started to read, paying no attention to the words, not even knowing what they were.

He could feel his gut tighten as he got closer to the circle of light that marked the nurses' station. A few feet to the left of that was the guard's desk. It had always seemed to Tom that this place couldn't make up its mind whether to be a jail or a hospital. Now he didn't care.

The guard, Morgan, had his face buried in a copy of *Playboy*. There was only one nurse at the station. The second, he knew, would be checking rooms in the east wing, and the third was on her break now, in the lounge. None of this knowledge was a result of luck or divine blessing. Tom knew that things were going so well only because he was so smart and had planned so carefully.

This part, however, had not been rehearsed; he was going in cold.

Keeping his head bent low over the book, Tom walked precisely in the narrow band of shadow that fell between the nurse and where Morgan sat. No man's land.

The nurse glanced his way, barely looking up from some papers she was working on. " 'Night, Billy," she said.

He raised a hand in absent-minded farewell.

Morgan was still huddled over his magazine.

Tom hardly allowed himself to breathe as he moved down the hall. He stopped at the electronically controlled door. "Hey," he said in a muffled voice, not turning.

"Sorry, Lang," Morgan said, belatedly pressing the release button. "See you."

"Yeah." He stepped through the doorway.

When he heard the lock click shut behind him, Tom had to bite his tongue to keep from shouting. But he held the emotional urge in. There were still plenty of ways for things to go wrong.

He didn't lift his head as he stepped into the elevator and turned toward the front, away from the gaze of the operator. The ride down was silent, with Tom reading and

the other man yawning. When the doors slid open again, Tom got out quickly.

It was all so unbelievably goddamned simple.

He paused long enough in the lobby to sign out, scribbling Lang's name in the thick book shoved at him. He could sense the guard look quickly at the picture on the badge that was pinned to the front of the windbreaker, then at him.

One part of his mind expected an outcry, and he was ready for it. They wouldn't stop him now, no matter what. Not when freedom was so close that he could almost taste it. His fingers curled around the knife inside the pocket as he crossed the lobby.

But nothing happened.

Tom smiled a little. There would probably be some changes made around this place when it was discovered that he'd gotten out. Heads would roll. Still smiling, he nodded to the guard by the door and walked out.

Freedom.

There was still one more hurdle in his path, but Tom was absolutely calm as he turned away from the employee parking lot and headed, instead, for the front gate.

Still another damned uniformed man stepped out of the cubicle as he saw Tom approach. "What's up?" he asked, checking the badge in the dim light.

"Fucking car died. I think it's the battery."

"Want me to call the auto club?"

Tom shook his head. "Thanks, but I already called a friend to pick me up. I'll worry about the car in the morning. Right now, I just wanna get home."

"I can dig that."

Tom peered down the road and saw two faint pinpoints of light. They blinked once, then again. "There's my ride."

The guard opened the gate and waved Tom through.

He walked rapidly away, feeling the darkness close

around him protectively. As he got closer to the lights, he could see a solitary figure inside the old brown pick-up.

Jody. His brother hadn't let him down.

Tom felt a smile beginning on his face, although he knew that Jody couldn't see him yet. It didn't matter. He was free. They were together again.

It was great to be alive.

Chapter 2

"So? What about it?"

"So what about what?"

"You want to screw or not?"

Her name was Pamela, and no one would ever have the guts to call her Pam. She had very long, absolutely straight silver-blonde hair, tortoise shell glasses, and at the moment, an expression of exquisite disgust on her face. "You really enjoy playing the role, don't you?" she asked, instead of answering his question.

Blue Maguire paused in the middle of what he was doing, which happened to be mixing another pitcher of margaritas. "What role is that?" He supposed that dialogue like this was what he deserved for getting involved with a professor of sociology. Knowing that, unfortunately, didn't make it any easier to live with.

Pamela sighed. "The role of macho cop," she said wearily.

"Oh, that role. Sure, I enjoy it." He gestured toward the just-silenced television with one salt-rimmed glass. "Me and Dirty Harry Callahan. Just a couple of tough guys walking the mean streets."

"Maybe the part suits him. It doesn't suit you."

"No?" He crossed the room and gave her one of the drinks, then sat facing her, his own glass in hand. "Why doesn't it 'suit' me, as you say?" Stretching his legs out onto the glass-topped table, he stared at her.

"You're far too intelligent to be very believable as a dumb cop."

"Cops are dumb?"

She shrugged. "You must admit that there aren't very many brilliant minds in the field."

He nodded slowly and sipped the drink. "Anything besides my extraordinary mind makes you think I don't belong?"

A faint smile tugged at her lips, but she suppressed it; this was, apparently, to be a Serious Discussion. "You don't dress for the part," she said.

"Which would be how?"

"In a baggy suit that hasn't been pressed since Ike left office. Jesus, you don't even have a beer gut."

He was wearing a pale green Lacoste shirt, with tailored jeans, and soft leather Italian-made loafers. Still, his wardrobe seemed fairly irrelevant to the issue at hand. "But I am a cop," he said. "And cops are supposed to be team players. So shouldn't I try to fit the mold? Shouldn't I try to belong as much as I can?"

She didn't say anything to that. They drank in silence for a moment.

"Besides," Blue said eventually, "if I'm not a cop like all the others, what am I?" He said the words with a smile, but there was a real question in the tone.

Pamela licked salt from the edge of her glass. "That's the crucial question we have to deal with."

Ah, this went even beyond Serious. It was Crucial. "Why do we have to deal with it?" he asked.

"Because if you don't know yourself, what becomes of us? How can there even be an us?"

He was beginning to see where all this talk was heading; it didn't take a baseball bat across the skull for him to get the point. He swallowed another gulp of tequila. "I don't think that follows. Necessarily."

But she said that it did, of necessity, follow. Her line of reasoning had something to do with the parts being greater than the whole. Or maybe it was the other way around.

Blue wasn't sure, because he wasn't really listening. There were grains of salt stuck along her upper lip, and she swiped at them absently with the tip of her tongue. Instead of paying attention to her words, Blue was thinking about how much he'd like to fuck her. He toyed with the idea of just throwing her down on the rug, ripping off the black denim skirt she was wearing, and going at it hot and heavy. Probably, if he were any other man within the ranks of L.A.P.D.'s macho finest, he would have done just that. She might even have liked it.

But no matter how strong the urge, he just couldn't picture Detective Second Blue Maguire, with his fancy master's degree in criminology and his three-hundred dollar shoes, doing something like that. And maybe when all was said and done, or undone, that was the real problem.

She was still talking, using her lecture room voice. "Maybe we just shouldn't see one another for a while."

"How long a while?" he asked, mostly so that his end of the conversation would be held up.

"I don't know. A while. Time enough for both of us to try and understand who we are. What we want out of life. I think that would be a very good idea, don't you?" Her mouth pursed thoughtfully. "A period of personal evaluation."

Blue pushed himself up from the chair and walked around the room for a moment. Then he turned to face her. "Pamela, if you want to split, just say so. Why do you always have to cloak everything in some kind of damned sociological garbage-speak?"

"I'm sorry you think that's what I'm doing," she said stiffly. It was bad manners to dispute the professor.

"It's what you always do."

"Always is a very loaded word. An angry word. I wish you wouldn't react this way."

"I always react with hostility when I'm in the process of getting dumped. Rejection is a real downer, you know?"

"Let's not take off on a self-pity kick. Those kinds of feelings are very counter-productive."

"Go to hell," he muttered, stopping by the vast picture window that filled one entire wall of the room. He had a great view of the city from up here. It sometimes seemed as if all of L.A. belonged to him. No other cop he knew could afford to live this way. No honest cop, anyway.

Of course, no other cop he knew had a daddy who made a fortune in the early days of computers and was then kind enough to drop dead, leaving only one son and heir.

Pamela stood. "I think I'll just get my things and leave. Obviously you're not prepared to discuss this on any kind of rational level."

"Great. Fine. Leave. If I want to be irrational in my own damned house, I will be, thank you."

He followed her up the winding staircase to the bedroom and stood watching as she collected the residue of her time in his life. There wasn't much to collect. A short white nightgown styled like a man's shirt, a toothbrush, some make-up. A couple of impossibly thick textbooks and the new *Cosmopolitan*. Pamela was a modern woman who believed in traveling light. She didn't seem to want much baggage, either real or emotional.

She wasn't alone, of course; it seemed as if he kept meeting women who liked to move on sooner than he'd been ready for them to. He probably should have been used to this scene by now.

Just once he'd like to do the leaving.

Pamela had all of her things together very quickly, shoving them into a large canvas tote bag from the UCLA bookstore. "We'll talk," she said. It wasn't said with much conviction.

"Sure."

"You sound so bitter."

He gave a soft laugh. "No, babe, not bitter. Just sort of resigned."

She sighed, hoisted the bag, and started out of the room.

He let her get past him—she did it carefully, so they didn't touch—and down the stairs before he spoke again. "Pamela?"

"What?"

He went down into the living room. Her hand was on the doorknob. "Does this have anything to do with—" He broke off, then said savagely, "Maybe I'm just not very good in bed. Is that what this is all about?"

She looked at him for a long moment, then sighed and shook her head. "Oh, Blue. This is about a lot of things. Maybe mostly it's about the fact that you feel as if you have to ask that question." She looked as if there might be more to say, but then she only waved and left.

It was too quiet after she had gone. Blue turned on the television, flipped around the dial a couple of times, and finally settled on the cable news station, just for the background noise it provided.

Blue wasn't sure why he felt so bad. Pamela's walking out didn't come as any real surprise; he'd known for several days that it was coming. The signs had all been there. He walked over to the window again and leaned against the glass.

Shit.

What was it with him and broads? He couldn't seem to keep one around long enough to get tired of. They all got tired first. Some of them couldn't seem to handle the fact that he was a cop. The weird hours and broken dates made them crazy. At least, that was the excuse they offered. But maybe it was something else.

Far below he could see the fast moving, flashing light of a squad car. Something was happening. Whatever it was had

to be more interesting than a continued reflection on the sad saga of his love life.

Blue straightened and crossed the room again. He lowered the volume on the television, leaving the picture flickering, and switched on the police radio, hoping to find out what was coming down.

After turning off the lamp, he took the pitcher of margaritas and sat cross-legged on the floor. What was needed, he decided, was an attitude change. A shifting of his priorities. Nobody ever said he had to be his father's son. The old bastard had been an electronics genius who made a bundle. True enough. He'd also had a cock that was famous in most of the civilized world. Horny Hank Maguire, the gossip columnists used to call him.

Fine and good. When he died, there were a lot of unhappy women in the world. But that was Hank. Did that mean that Blue had to keep trying for stud of the year honors?

No, damnit, it didn't.

Blue liked being a cop, and he was good at it. What else did he need? Not to keep on competing with his father, that was for sure. And not to have his gut kicked by another broad walking out. To hell with it. From now on, all his energies would be devoted to being a better cop. Hell, he'd be the best damned cop in the history of the department.

And for the rest of it, he'd just buddy up to somebody in vice and find out where a man could get some of what he needed for cash on the line and no emotional investment.

Blue sat for a long time in the dark apartment, watching the city below and listening to the police calls, as he finished off the warm tequila.

Chapter 3

PROBABLY he should have been a whole lot smarter about it.

After all, he was no dummy, no virgin, for Chrissake, to the realities of life on the street. He'd been on the hustle for almost two years now, ever since splitting from Wichita, and he knew the ropes as well as anyone, better than some.

The gimmick was in learning how to read people, to spot the possible nutcases. More than once he'd thumbed a car to stop, then after getting a good look at the driver, moved on without getting in.

Pete had a lot of smarts. He knew the rules, and he lived by them, knowing how bad it could be if he didn't.

But what the hell. Nobody made exactly the right moves all the time. It was a hot night. The city was smack in the middle of the hottest damned summer on record, and the weight of that heat hung over everything oppressively, like a too-heavy wool blanket. People were getting itchy. He had been standing on the same corner of Santa Monica Boulevard for almost an hour, his thumb stuck uselessly in the air. He took off his Who concert tee shirt and shoved it into the waistband of his cutoffs, but it didn't seem to make him any cooler or to increase his desirability to the passing drivers.

It pissed him off that nobody would stop. Pete wasn't very good about keeping his temper. He tried to be mellow, but it just didn't work sometimes.

When the truck pulled to a grinding halt just a few feet past the corner, Pete didn't use all the brains and street smarts that he had.

The truck itself should have given him his first warning.

It was an old Ford, dirty grey-brown in color, with too many dents to count and what sounded like the beginnings of a bad muffler.

But he ran up to the truck anyway, because he was so tired of standing on that corner, feeling like the fucking invisible man. He stepped onto the running board and peered into the cab. There were two men inside. That fact set off a small buzz way in the back of his mind. Usually he tried to avoid cars with more than one person inside. Not because he had anything against an orgy now and then, if he knew the others involved. What he didn't like was being outnumbered by strangers.

"Where you heading?" the passenger asked.

"Downtown. The bus depot."

" 'Kay. Get in."

The other guy, the driver, didn't say anything. Pete balanced where he was, listening to the warning buzz that was telling him to skip this and wait for something better.

But it was so damned hot. And more important, if he didn't get downtown pretty damned soon, Doc would be gone, taking his supply of rainbow-colored goodies with him. Pete was feeling wired; he needed some of what Doc had to offer. And broke as he was, Doc was his only hope for feeling better. It had been two weeks since the last time, and the fat pharmacist was undoubtedly horny again.

"Make up your mind," the man said impatiently.

"Okay, sure," Pete said, opening the door. The man shifted over a little to make room. "Thanks for stopping."

"No problem."

Although he was grateful for the ride, Pete still couldn't relax. He sat as close to the door as he could get, ready to make a fast exit if it became necessary.

After a few minutes, the silence in the truck became uncomfortable, so he cleared his throat. "I'm Pete."

"Nice to meet you, Pete," the man next to him said. "I'm Tom, and this here is Jody."

"Terrific. Sure is hot, huh?"

"Yeah, sure is." Tom moved in the seat slightly so that he was a little closer. He stank of beer and sweat. "Kinda late to be out, ain't it?"

"I gotta meet a guy."

"Right away?"

"Yeah, sort of." Pete leaned forward so that he could see better through the grimy windshield. "I don't think we're going the right way."

"Don't worry about it."

"But I'm in this hurry, see. If I don't connect—" He shut up.

"What're you hoping to connect for, Pete?"

He frowned. "Nothing, I guess." He tried to judge the speed of the truck. Too fast; he'd break a fucking leg if he tried to jump out now. Maybe if he just waited until a red light. Could these pricks be narcs? Or maybe vice?

Tom reached into the glove compartment and pulled something out.

Pete waited for him to flash a badge, but when he looked all he saw was a plastic baggie filled with pills. "What's that?" he asked, trying to sound as if it didn't matter much.

"A little bit of everything. You want some?"

"Well, to be honest, Tom," he hedged, "I'm a little short right now, cashwise."

Tom laughed and poked an elbow into the driver's ribs. "Hell, Pete here thinks we wanna sell him some of this shit. He thinks we're dealing. That's a laugh, huh?"

Jody glanced at Pete and smiled a little. He was a slightly younger edition of Tom, with the same lean, dark face and curly hair.

"You think we're dealing? No way, Petey." Tom grinned and patted Pete's bare knee. "We were thinking more of having a party. Just you and me and Jody here. You like the sound of that?"

Pete swallowed, considering. Okay, so he'd miss Doc

this time around. But maybe with these guys he could cop some joy medicine and pick up some bread at the same time. "Ten bucks extra for both of you," he said, wanting to get things clear right up front.

"Ten? That's a little steep, don't you think? Especially since we're willing to share the goodies."

"Five extra, then. I got overhead to meet."

"That's more like it. Sounds good to me. How's that seem to you, Jody?"

"Fine," he said, speaking for the first time.

"Great. So let's get a move on. Time to party."

"Where are we going for this party?" Pete asked.

"The park. Old Griffith Park. I haven't been there in a long time. Years. That sounds like a good place to have a party, don't you think?"

"I guess so," Pete said.

He still wasn't sure about this, but it was too late now. Besides, he thought, at least these guys weren't fat and gross, like Doc. He looked at Tom and forced a smile to his lips. "We'll have fun."

Tom stared at him for a moment. His eyes, startlingly pale blue in the dark face, held a hungry, fevered look. "Count on it, Pete," he said. He reached out a hand and ruffled Pete's sweaty hair.

Pete was used to hungry eyes and eager hands. He leaned against the door and closed his eyes. He hoped to hell the creeps had the bread to pay him. He hoped the little baggie had some really high-powered shit in it. And mostly he hoped that the two of them weren't kinky. It was too damned hot for any of the funny stuff.

Chapter 4

THE PHONE RANG.

"Shut the hell up."

It rang again.

"Gonna pull your fucking cord out."

Again.

One hand reached out, groping, searching for the offending instrument. The damned thing wasn't there. It kept ringing, but it wasn't there.

Spaceman Kowalski yanked the pillow from over his head, grunting as an explosion of daylight crashed against him. He blinked and then stared. The ceiling above was pale blue. With little silver stars painted all over it. Most definitely not his ceiling.

The other occupant of the bed finally answered the phone, which happened to be on her side of the room. The same goddamned thing happened everytime he spent the night here. He never got used to either the ceiling or to having the phone in the wrong place.

"Hello," she said. Perkily. She sounded perky at the frigging crack of dawn. Like Sandra Dee in some old movie. There really was no justice in the world.

And what the hell had ever happened to Sandra Dee?

Spaceman shrugged away that momentous question and managed to focus on his Timex. Seven-thirty. Almost time for work, anyway.

Mandy held the receiver out toward him. "It's for you," she said. The voice now held only disappointment, and he knew it was because the call wasn't from her agent.

He took the phone and sat up. "Yeah?" The taste in his mouth reminded him vaguely of the smell hovering over a

garbage dump where he'd once spent three days looking for a body. He belched into the receiver.

"Detective Kowalski?"

"No, it's fucking Princess Di. Whattaya want?"

"The lieutenant wants you should go over to Griffith Park."

"Why?"

"Maybe he wants to have a picnic." The voice was end-of-the-shift snippy.

Spaceman watched as Mandy got out of bed and walked, naked, across the room. She had great tits. They bounced just enough. "Why does McGannon want me to go to the park at seven-thirty in the morning?" he asked pleasantly, proud of his restraint. He was determined that the word "surly" wouldn't appear anywhere in his next fitness report.

"Somebody found a stiff. You're still working homicide, right? Maybe, just maybe, that's why McGannon wants you there."

He wished he could put a name to the voice, but Los Angeles could freeze over before he'd ask. "Wonderful," he said instead. "That's just what I need this morning." He was hung-over and had gas, but did the killers of this city care? Fat chance. He belched again and asked just where in the park the picnic was happening.

The voice told him.

He hung up without saying good-bye.

Mandy came out of the bathroom and, still naked, started her exercises. "What's up?"

He thought about saying something real clever, like "I am, and what're you gonna do about it?" But a quick check under the sheet revealed the dismal truth. It was hell to be thirty-eight. What would life be like after forty? It didn't even bear thinking of. So he told her about the stiff in the park that he had to go see.

In the middle of a leg lift, she made a face. "Gross," she said. "Before breakfast, even?"

He watched the exercise routine for a moment, then realized that unless he got out of the bed immediately, even his aging flesh would start to react.

And he had a picnic to go to.

He got out of bed and headed for the bathroom. "Make some coffee," he ordered.

Even the lukewarm water the old pipes churned up felt good as it washed away the sweat and sticky wine from his chest. As he scrubbed with a bar of lime green glycerine soap, Spaceman wasn't thinking about what might have happened in the park. He was wondering, not for the first time, why the devil anybody would put the Big Dipper on her bedroom ceiling.

She had instant coffee made and some frozen orange juice about half-thawed by the time he came out, trying to smooth the wrinkles from his old brown suit. It was a fairly hopeless task.

He swallowed the lumpy juice in one gulp and started on the coffee. As he drank, he worked on his tie with a damp paper towel. Mandy had donned an old sweatshirt and a pair of white panties. She sat in a chair, watching him and eating a bagel that dripped strawberry jam. "You want something to eat?"

His stomach did a flip-flop. "No time," was all he said to her. Couldn't let the twenty-year-old know that middle age took some things harder than did youth.

One of these days, he thought, giving up on the tie, I'll find a woman my own age.

The young stuff was going to kill him off before his time. How many late night parties with cheap wine, pepperoni pizza, and pot could a man of his age take before the damage got serious?

The thick black coffee burned his gullet. "Gotta go," he said, taking one last gulp.

She untwined herself from the chair to give him a hug. "What about tonight?"

"I'll have to see. No promises. The thing in the park might screw up my whole day." His hands slid down her back until the fingers were gently massaging the firm flesh inside the silky panties.

"Well, lemme know," she said, going back to her bagel.

Wondering what she did on the nights he worked, Spaceman moved carefully down the narrow outside staircase that led to her third floor apartment. One good tremor and the whole damned thing would collapse. Probably with him on it.

Maybe it was time to think about losing those fifteen extra pounds.

Except that it would probably be easier to find a girl who lived on the ground floor.

Once inside his car, he radioed headquarters that he was rolling on the dead body in Griffith Park. As he spoke, he stared into the rearview mirror.

The pink Lady Schick had done a perfectly miserable job of shaving his face.

Chapter 5

SPACEMAN KOWALSKI liked being a cop.

He didn't like morning traffic. Hunched over the steering wheel of his '76 Chevy, he swore and sweated his way from Mandy's place on Beverly toward the park. Finally, he pulled the bubblegum light from under the seat and shoved it onto the roof. With that flashing and the siren cranked up, his progress was made a little easier, though not much. Nostalgically, he thought about the good old days when he was a kid. Back then, the other traffic would pull over to make room for a cop on a run. There was respect.

But then came the Sixties and the old world fell apart. Now a few drivers got out of his way, most didn't, and a goodly number swore at him or made some obscene gesture. All of which he returned in kind.

Something else he didn't like, besides traffic, was looking at dead bodies.

If the departed citizen was reasonably tidy, he could usually handle it with no problem. The old farts who just expired in bed, for example. That wasn't fun, but if the carcass didn't lie around too long before being found, it was at least tolerable. Maybe this case was just some old fart who stretched out in the grass and passed away.

He could hope, anyway.

Two zone cars and a black van from the medical examiner's office were parked near the bird sanctuary when he arrived. Nobody was doing much, however; nobody would until he had a chance to view the scene intact. The routine was part of the mystique surrounding police work. Spaceman was supposed to see something, the clue, that

would set the wheels of justice turning, no matter how slowly.

The first thing he saw was that this body wasn't neat and tidy.

The stiff was just a kid. About the age of his own son, he realized, remembering suddenly, parenthetically, that Robbie had a birthday coming up soon. He'd have to buy something for the occasion.

This boy wouldn't be having any more birthdays. He'd been a good-looking boy, maybe sixteen, with longish blond hair and the pouty kind of face that was popular in some circles. A bloody tee shirt and some shorts were next to the body. There was a lot of blood.

"Shit," Spaceman said.

Gardner, from the pathologist's office, nodded. "That just about says it all."

"Pictures?"

"All done."

When he had given the whole area a fast once-over, Spaceman gave a short nod. Gardner promptly knelt beside the body.

Spaceman bent over and picked up the shorts. He pulled a worn black wallet out of the rear pocket, then handed the shorts themselves to a cop holding a plastic evidence bag.

The only money in the wallet was a single dollar bill, well-creased, that had been tucked into a hidden compartment. Obviously, the buck was intended to be used only in case of the direst emergency. There wasn't much else to see. Two pictures. The first was of a family group standing at stiff attention in front of a house. A middle-aged man in a checkered sport coat, a thin, tense looking woman, and three children. A girl, middle teens, wearing a short pleated skirt and a letter sweater. A much younger boy in a Cub Scout uniform. The third child was obviously the dead boy, looking a couple years younger,

but otherwise much the same. He was wearing jeans, a black tee shirt, and a petulant, dissatisfied expression.

Except for that one false note, the photo might have served as the basis for a Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* cover. There was even a dog that might have been Lassie. Americana preserved by Kodak.

And if not for that expression of dissatisfaction and the feelings behind it, the dead boy might still be a part of the picture. Spaceman knew, without knowing anything else about the people in the photo, that it was the boy's search for something different from what he had in that house that had brought him to this bloody and terrible end in Griffith Park.

The other picture was from one of the quickie booths downtown. The dead boy, looking drunk and silly, grinned up at Spaceman.

There were only a few other things in the wallet, none of them very significant, except for the ID card tucked behind the pictures. It was the kind of card that came with cheap wallets like this one. The name on the card was Peter Lowe, and the address was on Honeydew Lane in Wichita, Kansas.

There wasn't much else in the wallet: A shiny gold token from some game arcade, maybe used as a good luck piece, and a stub from a downtown movie house.

That was all.

Spaceman walked back to Gardner just as the other man stood. "Anything?"

"Not much beyond the obvious so far. Somebody used a knife on him. I stopped counting the stab wounds at fifteen. About one for every year of his life. Some indication of sexual activity just before death."

"He was raped?"

Gardner looked slightly annoyed. "Sexual activity and rape are not synonymous." He shrugged. "Anyway, the poor bastard didn't die easy."

"Let me know when the post is scheduled."

"Sure thing."

Spaceman watched as the body was tagged, bagged, and loaded into the black van. A minicam crew from one of the stations had appeared on the scene, drawn by the smell of blood, and the reporter stuck the mike into Spaceman's face. "No comment," he said. That was all he ever said to them, and he sometimes wondered why they kept asking.

"Can't you tell us anything about this brutal crime?"

"No comment," he repeated. Too many cops got themselves into trouble by opening their traps on camera or for the newspaper.

They filmed him anyway, walking to his car and getting in. He sat behind the wheel for a moment, then belched again.

"Shit," he said once more, this time to himself.

And to anyone who might catch the tape on the noon news and who could read lips.

Chapter 6

SPACEMAN decided that he needed some breakfast

He parked his car in the police lot and walked around the corner. There wasn't any name on the front of the tiny building he entered, just the stark word DINER over the door. The place was owned and operated by an ex-homicide dick named Joe Spinoza. Not surprisingly, considering the location, cops made up almost his entire clientele. Whatever Joe's talents had been as a detective, they did not, unfortunately, extend to his culinary efforts. The food he served up reminded a lot of the men of home cooking, and that wasn't a compliment. But he dearly loved to have the guys from the precinct come in, the prices were more than reasonable, and it was convenient. Also, Joe was always willing to let you run a tab.

Spaceman perched at the otherwise empty counter and without even glancing at the mimeographed menu, ordered his usual: three eggs over easy, sausage links, hash browns, toast, and coffee.

Joe cracked the eggs and poured them onto the sizzling grill. "So what's doing?" he asked. He spoke in a raised voice, in order to be heard over the steady drone of the police radio and the small black and white television, both of which sat behind the counter, always on.

Spaceman wondered if Joe ever left this place, ever slept beyond the catnaps that he was sometimes seen taking behind the counter. It seemed that whenever a customer came in, day or night, the plump, balding man was on the job. His wife of forty years was dead, and Spaceman always figured that Joe was happier here than in an empty house.

"I caught the stiff in Griffith," Spaceman said in glum response to Joe's question. The coffee wasn't much better than Mandy's. He added another little packet of sugar.

"I heard about that on the box. Sounded messy."

"Yeah."

Joe flipped the eggs with concentration a brain surgeon might have envied, then slid them onto a plate. He added three sausages, a mound of potatoes that were only slightly burned, and two pieces of toasted Wonder Bread. "Any leads?"

"Nada."

Joe moved a sticky pot of orange marmalade down the counter to within Spaceman's reach. "Well, I'll keep my eyes and ears open. You never know." He always said that, no matter what the case. In all his years of running the diner and offering to "keep my eyes and ears open" Joe had never turned up one piece of solid dope, as far as Spaceman knew. But that didn't stop him from trying.

"Yeah, do that," Spaceman said. "Any help gratefully received." He lowered his head over the plate and began to shovel the food in.

The lieutenant was waiting when Spaceman strolled into the squadroom. "Took your sweet time getting here," he complained.

Spaceman removed the toothpick from his mouth, contemplated the well-chewed sliver, then shoved it back. "I had to catch some breakfast. Can't think on an empty stomach."

McGannon only snorted. His own body was whippet-thin compared to Spaceman's bulkier form. He waved Spaceman into his office. Inside, McGannon sat behind the vast desk that took up most of the space in the small room. The desk gave his men a lot of laughs.

McGannon's father and grandfather had both been lawyers, real movers and shakers in the legal

establishment, and the big hunk of oak had been part of their prestigious offices. McGannon himself flunked out of law school and became a cop. His most driving ambition over the years had been to work his way far enough up the ladder of command to rate his own office. The very day he landed this job, the desk was moved in.

Now he leaned back in the chair and clasped both hands behind his head. "So?" he said. "Any first impressions?"

Spaceman broke the toothpick in half and tossed the pieces into the heavy cut-glass ashtray on the corner of the desk. "Some sex freako," he said flatly.

McGannon frowned. He didn't like cases that had anything at all to do with sex. He was what used to be known as a "good Catholic." In his view, sex was for married couples only, to be committed once a week in the dark, with its only object being the propagation of the faithful. Any pleasure that might happen along the way was permitted, but never acknowledged. Kathleen and he had six kids, with a seventh on the way, and even they never talked about sex.

Money was a motive that he could understand. Or even drugs. But anything to do with sex made him very nervous. "But this was just a kid," he objected.

"Want a theory?" Spaceman asked.

McGannon looked tired suddenly, a man who knew he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear. He nodded anyway.

"I think the kid was hustling and picked up the wrong customer."

McGannon sighed.

"Whoever he picked up wasted him. Did a very messy job of it, too."

"That's really sick," McGannon said, his voice ringing with a moral ferocity that Spaceman used to think was phony, but which he finally decided was real. It sometimes made him feel kind of sorry for the other man.

Spaceman smiled faintly. "Sick? Yeah, that's probably just what the defense attorney will claim when we bust him."

"If we bust him."

Spaceman spread his hands to indicate helplessness. "If we lose hope, there's nothing left."

"And even if we do bust him, chances are it'll never come to trial."

The damned gloomy Irishman. "That's not my look-out."

McGannon was quiet, swiveling from side to side in his fancy chair. "Kids. What the hell is going on? When I was his age, there wasn't any of the shit that goes on today."

"Sex, you mean?"

"I mean, all this weird stuff. Who the hell started it all anyway?"

"Beats me, boss. Maybe it was the hippies. Or the Beatles."

"The damned Commies, probably," McGannon said darkly.

Spaceman shook his head. "All the Reds I ever knew were puritans. Worse than Republicans, even." He lit a Camel and waited for McGannon to get back on the track.

Finally he did so, crisply. "You want to call the parents?"

No, he didn't want to.

He was tired of making that same dismal call. Kids, the damned little shitheads, seemed to come from all over the country just to get killed or kill themselves in his city.

See Los Angeles and die.

That would make a great bumper sticker.

So he made the call, time after time, and broke the news. The reactions he got never seemed to vary much in type, only in degree. Disbelief, followed by anger, then painful and weary acknowledgement. At bottom, it never seemed to come as much of a surprise. Parents today apparently expect something like this to happen, sooner or later.

He thought again about his own son. What the devil did a boy just turning seventeen want for his birthday?

"I'll make the call," he said.

It was a crummy job, yeah, but he always did it himself. Maybe he hoped that by talking to a mother or father in that first unguarded moment, he might uncover something that would lead him to the why.

McGannon was still frowning. "Well, keep me on top of it," he said, closing the discussion.

"Sure thing." Spaceman started for the door.

"Oh, by the way, Kowalski—"

"Yeah?"

McGannon studied him, smiling faintly now. Then he shook his head. "Later."

"There a problem?"

"No. No problem. Just something we need to talk about. Drop in after lunch."

Spaceman shrugged. "Sure."

He went out to his own desk. Several other detectives were in the room as well, talking, writing reports, or just drinking coffee from styrofoam cups. Spaceman picked up his phone and dialed information.

He scribbled down the number a bored operator gave him a moment later. Frowning, he traced the numbers over more firmly as he mentally figured time differences. Getting on toward eleven here, which meant almost one there. One o'clock on a summer Saturday. What were the chances of finding anyone home?

But he dialed anyway, because he had no choice. The ringing of the other phone sounded very far away. Once, twice, three times, then the ringing stopped. "Hello?"

It was a male voice, for which he was glad. Easier to break news like this to a man than a woman. The voice sounded a little winded, as if its owner had to run to catch the call. Probably he'd been outside, cutting the grass or

feeding the cows or whatever else one does in Kansas on Saturday.

"Mr. Lowe?"

"Speaking."

"My name is Kowalski. Detective Kowalski, Los Angeles Police Department."

"What's that? California?"

"Yes, sir."

"Whatever trouble he's got himself into, I'm not bailing him out." The words were immediate and harsh.

"You're talking about your son, Peter Lowe?"

"He's no son of mine, not any more."

Spaceman picked up his pen again. He wrote the dead boy's name on the notepad, then drew hard black lines through it. "The trouble he has now, you can't bail him out of."

"What?"

"I'm afraid it's very bad news, Mr. Lowe. A boy we've identified as Peter was found deceased this morning."

"He's dead?"

"Yes. Apparently Peter was the victim of a homicide."

Lowe seemed to mull that over for a time. "Somebody killed him is what you're saying?" The flat midwestern voice never wavered.

"Yes."

There was still another pause. "You sure it's him?"

"Yes. As sure as we can be without an official ID." He thought maybe that sounded a little hopeful, and hope was a commodity that nobody could afford anymore. "It's Peter," he said.

"I told him that sooner or later he'd get just what he deserved."

"Sir?" Spaceman stopped scribbling and set the pen down carefully.

"Peter was no good. He's been nothing but trouble to us

since he was ten. I knew he'd end up bad. And you want to know something? I'm glad it's over. Yeah, I really am."

Spaceman didn't know what to say. It wasn't the first time he'd had this kind of reaction; usually he put it down to shock. Lowe didn't sound shocked, though. He didn't sound anyway in particular. Spaceman took a deep breath. "This is difficult," he began awkwardly. "But——"

"He left us two years ago. This was a good home, officer. We gave him everything a boy needs."

Spaceman thought about the dissatisfied expression on the young face in the family photograph. Not everything, he wanted to tell Lowe. At least, not all the things Peter thought he needed. Or wanted.

"We're good Christians, church-going people. I'm an alderman. But Peter threw all that back in our faces. Made out like it was us in the wrong instead of him. You want to know how many times we heard from him in the past two years?"

Spaceman made a noncommittal sound.

"I'll tell you. Once. Just about a year ago. And that once was too much for me."

"What did he want?"

"What else? Money, of course."

"Did you send him some?"

"Certainly not. That would have condoned his lifestyle. I did the only thing a righteous man could."

"Which was?"

"I told him that if he was willing to renounce the way he was living, and come home, we would forgive him."

"You would forgive him."

"Yes." Lowe was obviously very pleased with himself. "Even after all he'd done, I was willing to accept him back. To give him one more chance at a decent life."

"But he refused your generous offer?"

Lowe missed the sarcasm. "He did. And worse. Told me in plain words just how ugly and degraded his life had

become. About the drugs. About...unspeakable things. I just thank the good Lord that my wife never had to hear the things Peter told me that night."

"Okay," Spaceman said briskly. "I can understand how you felt. But that's all in the past now. Your son is dead. What arrangements do you want to make for the body?"

"I'm not interested in making any arrangements at all."

"Lowe, despite the problems he caused you, Peter was your son. Your responsibility."

"You must have some kind of potter's field out there, don't you?"

Spaceman nodded wearily, then remembered that the man couldn't see him. "Yes, I guess we do."

"Put him there. Put him anywhere you want. He's not a part of us anymore."

"Don't you want—"

"That's all I have to say." He hung up.

Spaceman slowly followed suit. He was thinking about the bloody, ravaged body he'd seen in the park, and about the cold, hard voice of Lowe. "The world sucks," he announced.

Jefferies, a skinny black man, looked his way and laughed softly. "That supposed to be some kind of news?"

"No, but I keep forgetting how damned much it sucks, until somebody reminds me."

Nobody said anything to that.

Spaceman had a report to type from another case, the killing of one wino by another over the disputed ownership of a bottle of Thunderbird. Said bottle, in fact, being the death weapon. It wasn't a very long report, but he was a slow typist, so it took a while.

Just as he was finishing, the phone rang.

"Kowalski," he answered, yanking the completed report from the grip of the ancient Smith-Corona, and tossing it toward his out basket.

"Hi." It was a woman's voice, not Mandy's.

"Yes?"

There was a sigh from the other end. "I thought you might recognize my voice. But I guess ex-wives are very forgettable."

"Hi, Karen." Just what he needed to put the finishing touch on a morning that was already the pits. "The check's in the mail," he said automatically.

"The check came last week," she replied. "That's not why I'm calling."

"Oh?" He shifted the phone to his other ear and initialed an earlier report that he'd forgotten to initial the first time around, causing McGannon to send it back. "What's up?"

"We have to talk. Can I see you? Maybe for lunch?"

"It's not a good day, Karen. Things are closing in."

"It's never a good day for you. But this is important. It's about Robbie."

"I haven't forgotten his birthday."

"This isn't about his birthday, either." Her voice sounded strained.

"Then what?"

"Damnit, I can't talk now; I'm at work. Can we just meet for lunch?"

"All right, all right. Is Denny's okay?"

"Fine. How about—" She paused, probably checking her watch. "Forty minutes?"

"Be on time. I'm really pressed."

She hung up without saying any more.

Spaceman sat still for a moment, frowning. Karen never called him, except to bitch about the child support check being late. He hoped to hell this wasn't anything important; there was no room in his day for a major hassle.

Chapter 7

He woke without knowing where he was.

Panic filled him in the first terrifying moment; as he stared at the ceiling of the unfamiliar room, his breathing quickened. He began to hyperventilate.

Remembering what the shrinks had told him, Tom closed his eyes again, squeezing them tight, and tried to relax. Consciously, he slowed the workings of his lungs. The fear that was gripping him began to fade.

And then he remembered: I'm free.

A smile began as he rolled over and opened his eyes once again. "Hey," he said.

Jody sat up in the other bed, looking like he'd been awake for a while. "Hey, yourself," he responded listlessly.

Tom felt a rush of feeling for his little brother. Jody was the only person in the world who really understood him. Who really loved him.

With the happiness in his chest pounding hard enough to hurt, Tom got out of bed. "I'm hungry," he said. "Let's have a really big breakfast." He grinned. "No oatmeal, though. They serve that every damned morning back at the hospital."

"We can go a couple blocks over," Jody said. "There's a good place on Figueroa." His voice was flat.

Tom called first dibs on the bathroom, then stopped in the doorway. "You okay?"

"Sure. Why?"

"You just seem kind of down."

Jody looked at him for a long moment, then shrugged. "I'm fine."

Tom nodded and went into the bathroom.

While the water in the shower slowly warmed up, he brushed his teeth and urinated. He noticed that there was still some blood caked beneath his fingernails.

When the water was finally hot, he stepped in under the spray and began to scrub. He used lots of soap, almost the whole of the little bar the motel provided, rubbing with the worn cloth until his skin was red and stinging.

Last night already seemed very far away. All that remained with him clearly was the memory of the excitement he'd felt, the almost unbearably beautiful agony of the moment. He'd never known such feelings, such complete release when it was over.

Just thinking about it made his groin ache.

He stroked himself slowly with soapy fingers. Then, abruptly, he pulled his hand back. Hell, no time for that now. He turned off the hot water and let the sudden icy blast hit him full force. It helped.

Jody got out of the bed and walked over to the mirror.

He looked the same. Maybe his eyes were a little bloodshot and his face pale, but beyond that Jody Hitchcock seemed to be the same man as he'd always been. Which was ridiculous, of course.

A shiny nail clipper was lying on the top of the dresser and Jody picked it up. He carefully removed a hangnail that had been bothering him for a couple of days.

His reflection in the mirror stared out at him. Jody could almost see the blood that should have covered his hands. "Shit," he whispered to the glass image. "What the hell is going on?"

The figure in the mirror had no answer.

Since the restaurant was so close, they left the truck parked at the motel and walked over. On the way, Tom breathed deeply of the hot, fume-filled air. To him, it was freedom he was inhaling and that made it sweet, no matter what.

Then he frowned a little. The morning newscaster on the television had talked about fires burning around Los Angeles, out-of-control flames, fanned by the Santa Ana winds blowing hot and fierce. According to the news story, arson was suspected in some of the fires. That bothered Tom. This was his city, and nobody had the right to destroy it.

The Original Pantry Cafe was crowded, and so it took several minutes for them to get a table. Jody said he never ate much in the mornings, so all he wanted was some orange juice and scrambled eggs. Tom, however, gave in to his hunger, ordering a pile of buttermilk pancakes, some eggs and ham, toast, and coffee. He was stunned to see what the prices were. It had been so long since he'd been in the real world. He had a lot of catching up to do.

The coffee was strong and hot. He sipped it carefully while waiting for the food. "We've got a lot to do," he said.

Jody was folding and unfolding his napkin. "What?"

"First of all, we have to lose the truck."

"My truck? Why"

"Because we've used it enough. For my break and for all the rest. Somebody just might remember it."

"That's my truck," Jody said. "It's a good vehicle."

Tom didn't like the tone of Jody's voice. He looked at him for a moment. "We have to lose the truck," he said again, very quietly.

Jody frowned, but didn't say any more about it.

The food arrived and for several minutes they ate in silence. Tom poured more syrup over his plate. "Then we need to pick up some new wheels," he said, as if there had been no pause in the conversation.

"You mean steal a car?" Jody asked, playing with his eggs more than eating them.

"No, asshole, we'll walk into a dealer and buy a new Caddy," Tom said. "Of course steal one."

"And then?"

Tom just smiled. He pushed a piece of pancake around in the blueberry puddle.

After another moment, Jody leaned across the table toward him. "About what happened last night," he began softly.

"Yeah?"

"Are we going to do that anymore?"

"Do you want to?"

"Not the way it ended."

"Forget about the way it ended. What about the rest? You liked that, didn't you?"

Jody didn't say anything.

Tom concentrated on cutting a piece of ham. Then he looked up and smiled again. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe we'll do it some more."

Chapter 8

KAREN was already sitting at a table near the back when Spaceman walked into Denny's five minutes late. She glanced pointedly at her watch, but didn't say anything.

She looked good. In the years since their divorce, Karen had worked hard to get her act together, and it was clear that she had succeeded. There wasn't much left of the girl he'd married: a plump eighteen-year-old, with a puppy dog's eagerness to please. Now, with the extra weight long gone, the dishwater hair lightened to a radiant gold color, and a wardrobe that was too costly for a cop's wife, Karen was a different woman.

Maybe, he mused, if she'd been more like this during their marriage, the divorce never would have happened. He didn't know whether that should make him feel bad or not. Then he decided not. Life, as his old man used to say, was life, which was philosophy enough for Spaceman.

The waitress scurried over as soon as he sat down. She knew he was a cop, and most waitresses liked cops. He rewarded her promptness with a smile. Karen, obviously aware of the byplay, sighed, then ordered a chef's salad and iced tea. Spaceman went for a cheeseburger, fries, and a Coke. It was his favorite lunch.

When they were alone, Karen opened her purse, a large duffel of soft butterscotch leather, and removed a lighter and cigarettes. Her fingers were steady as she lit a Virginia Slims menthol. "Thank you for coming," she said, exhaling a cloud of smoke across the table toward him.

He couldn't quite tell whether the tone of her words was sarcastic or sincere. He never could with her. "You made it sound important."

She nodded, looking distracted. "Yes. Yes, it's about Robbie."

The drinks arrived and he took a long gulp. "You said that before."

"He's gone."

"Gone? What the hell does that mean?"

Now, suddenly, he could see the tiny lines of tension etched around her mouth. "It means just what I said. He's gone. G-o-n-e. He hasn't been home for three days."

"Three days?" Spaceman realized that he was beginning to sound like an echo, and he gave himself a mental shake. "Why don't you just start at the beginning?" he suggested. "Give me all the facts."

"Just the facts, ma'am? What the hell is this, your Joe Friday imitation?"

He sighed patiently. "I just want to know what's going on."

"Okay, okay, but don't play cop with me. This is your son we're talking about, not just one of your damned cases."

Spaceman didn't say anything.

Karen smoked in silence for a moment, watching something across the room. "When was the last time you saw Robbie?" she asked finally.

He thought. "Couple months ago, I guess." Still trying to remember, he stirred the Coke with the straw. "Yeah, it was on opening day. When I took him to see the Dodgers play."

"Have you even spoken to him since then?"

Spaceman started to feel like he was being accused of something. "I don't know. Maybe I called him. Probably I did." He couldn't remember calling.

The food arrived. He poured catsup on the fries and smeared some mustard on the burger. "Robbie didn't seem to enjoy the game much," he said. "In fact, the whole

damned day seemed like nothing but a big pain in the butt to him."

"So your tender feelings got hurt and you didn't call him again."

"I've been busy, is all." He wondered if what she were saying might be true. If so, it didn't seem to say much for him in the fathering department.

He picked up a couple of fries and chewed them while thinking about opening day. It was an annual trek for them, going out to see the Dodgers begin the season. They'd done it since Robbie was four.

But this year had been different. Robbie and he didn't seem to have anything to say to each other anymore. The boy was obviously his son; it was there in the square jawline and the green eyes. But lately the jaw always seemed to be set stubbornly, and the eyes were full of dark secrets.

During the drive to Dodger Stadium, Robbie slouched in the passenger seat, ostentatiously lighting one cigarette after another, and staring at the traffic. Any comment offered by his father was answered with either a grunt or a sigh.

Things didn't get any better at the game itself. Robbie perched on the bleacher seat like he was sitting in the dentist's waiting room. Even when the Bums managed to pull the game out in the bottom of the ninth, he didn't seem to give a damn.

They made the ritual stop for pizza on the way home, but Spaceman was frankly glad when the day ended, and Robbie seemed just as relieved when he jumped out of the car and disappeared into the house.

The next time he was slipped a couple of tickets to see a ballgame, he had taken Mandy, who hated baseball, but loved sitting on the sunny side of the stadium in her halter top, soaking up the rays.

Spaceman took another bite of the cheeseburger and chewed slowly. "Hell," he said. "Teenagers, they all get screwy."

"Do they?"

"Sure. I see it all the time."

She shook her head. "You see the bad kids. Robbie's not like them."

"I know that." He didn't know it, not really. Any kid could make a dumb mistake and screw up his life.

Karen stared at her plate, then pushed the half-eaten salad away. "I thought at first that maybe he was just staying with a friend. I mean, it's summer, so what the hell. But when he didn't show up again last night, I called some people. Nobody's seen him."

"At least nobody would say so. They stick together. Did something happen before he left?"

"Such as?"

"Such as anything. Like maybe the two of you had a fight?"

The skin over her cheekbones turned pink. "Are you saying this is my fault?"

"I'm not saying that at all, Karen. Anyway, so far nothing's happened to be anybody's fault. I'm just asking questions."

"No, we did not fight. Not any more than usual. You've never tried living with a sixteen-year-old day in and day out. It's not easy."

"I guess not."

"And it doesn't help that you never seem to be around."

He finished the burger in one more bite, chewed, and swallowed. "That was your choice, honey, not mine." His voice held more of the old bitterness than he would have thought possible.

Shit, I'm supposed to be over that by now. I'm not supposed to care anymore.

Karen spoke coldly: "It was you who decided to sleep

around. Somehow, my definition of marriage didn't include sharing you with every little bitch who had the hots for a cop."

He slurped Coke through a straw.

After a moment, Karen swept a stray blonde lock out of her face. "That is not why I'm here. No matter what happened between us, you're still his father. You should care."

"I care, damnit. Maybe I don't come around too often, but you've got no right to say I don't care. I do."

"You know that. Maybe I know, too. But I'm not sure Robbie does."

"All he had to do was call, whenever he wanted anything."

"Probably he doesn't even know what he wants." The words shook a little, and her eyes were suddenly too bright. "Maybe that's why he left."

A sudden image, sharp-edged and too real, flashed through Spaceman's mind: Peter Lowe's body. Just another dumb kid, looking for something, probably not even knowing what it was.

He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. "Shit," he said.

Karen looked up sharply. "What?"

He just shook his head.

"Can you do something?"

"I'll file a missing person sheet on him." Spaceman shrugged. "We get so damned many of those things. Especially on kids."

"So? Does that mean nobody will do anything?"

"What can be done, will be. I'll look for him myself, of course. Whenever I can."

She bristled. "Whenever you *can?*"

"I also have a job to do. Damnit, I have half a dozen open cases."

"Cases that are more important than finding your son?"

"Stop deliberately misinterpreting every goddamned word I say." He thought again about the dead boy, but he didn't think she needed to hear about that at the moment. "When was the last time you saw Robbie?"

That turned out to be four days ago, before she left for work. Apparently words were exchanged about taking out the garbage. Words that weren't particularly nice, on either side.

As she recounted the conversation, her smile was wryly bitter. "That's about par for our relationship lately."

"You don't have any idea where he might have gone?"

"No." She opened the purse again and took out a piece of paper. "I wrote down the names of his friends, with their addresses. The ones I know, anyway. There might be others."

"Where does he spend his time?"

"You mean besides shut up in his bedroom? At the beach, mostly, I think. Santa Monica. Venice, maybe. Wherever kids hang out these days."

"Where they hang out depends on what they're looking for."

She handed him the paper and then a picture. "I thought you might need one for the report. You probably don't have a recent one."

He shook his head. The only picture he had of his son showed a six-year-old dressed in a cowboy outfit. That smiling child in the fringed vest and matching pistols bore little likeness to the sullen teenager in this school photo. He thought that this face looked strangely angry. He put the paper and the picture into his wallet.

Karen looked at her watch again. "I have to go," she said. "I'm showing a house in twenty minutes. You'll call me tonight?"

"If I have anything."

She stood. "Even if you don't have anything, call. Just to let me know you're looking."

He nodded.

"Should I be scared?" The voice was a whisper, and at that moment she seemed very much like the girl he must have loved once upon a time.

Spaceman reached out to pat her hand. "Hell, no. And when I find him, I'll kick his ass all the way home for making you worry like this."

She tried a smile. It almost worked. "Talk to you later, then."

"Yeah, later."

She swung the bag over her shoulder and hurried out, looking once again like a successful woman on the move. Spaceman finished off the ice in his glass and picked up the check. This day was going from bad to shit. What the hell else could happen?

Outside, the air was hotter than ever as the temperature moved toward yet another record. He looked in the direction of the hills, wondering if the fires were still raging.

Hell of a job that, putting out fires.

Chapter 9

SPACEMAN managed to forget all about his appointment to see McGannon after lunch. He went back to the office to take care of the paperwork on Robbie, which bothered him more than he thought it should have, and then he was ready to hit the street and see what he could turn up on the Lowe boy.

But before he could get away from his desk, the phone rang. A bored voice from the medical examiner's office informed him that the autopsy on Lowe, Peter would begin in one hour. He thanked the voice and hung up.

That didn't give him enough time to do anything else first, so he was a sitting pigeon, just skimming the *Times* and working on a cigarette when McGannon opened the door of his office and waved him inside.

Spaceman swore under his breath. He didn't know what was coming, but it was damned sure not to be anything good. McGannon looked too happy; nothing made him that cheerful except finding some new way to screw up Spaceman's life. He slowly crushed the cigarette and walked with heavy steps into McGannon's cubbyhole.

McGannon, safely behind the damned desk again, had a slight and dangerous smile on his face. Spaceman's gut tightened. This was going to be nasty, no doubt about it.

It was only then that Spaceman noticed the third man in the room. The stranger smelled like Money, which made him a little nervous. He thought quickly, but couldn't come up with anything he'd done lately to get a bigshot mad at him. He tucked in his gut, smoothed his tie, and decided to tough it out.

"Kowalski, this is Maguire. I guess you heard about the

shift in personnel City Hall wants? 'More efficient deployment of available manpower' they call it."

"I heard."

"Well, Maguire here got caught in the winds of change. He's just been transferred into the division."

The stranger was a cop?

Spaceman took another look. Slender and tanned, Maguire looked more like a professional polo player than a homicide dick. His beige slacks and brown pinstripe didn't seem to have wilted in the heat at all. Or maybe he came wrapped in cellophane.

Maguire stood, extending a hand. One finger bore a silver ring set with a large, dull green stone. "Blue Maguire," he said, flashing a Bobby Kennedy grin.

Spaceman shook the hand quickly. "Spaceman Kowalski," he mumbled.

"Spaceman?"

"It's a long story." He dismissed Maguire and turned back to McGannon. "I gotta take off. The post on the Lowe kid."

"Good. On the way over, you can fill Maguire in on what you have so far."

Spaceman didn't say anything right away. Instead, he just looked from McGannon's shit-eating grin to the *GQ* cover boy standing next to him. "What?"

The grin widened to what seemed impossible dimensions. "As of now, the two of you are working together on this case."

Spaceman was peripherally aware that Maguire seemed to be as stunned by the news as he himself was. "Hey, lieutenant," he said in a strangled voice, "I work alone, you know? I do a solo," he explained to Maguire.

Maguire just looked at him.

McGannon snorted. "This isn't the Metropolitan Opera," he said. "We don't need any damned prima donnas."

"But you know I don't work so good with other people." Spaceman knew from long and painful experience that this was a losing battle, but he had to give it his best shot anyway. "My personality is like sandpaper. I antagonize people. That's what *you* told me, remember?"

The bastard didn't seem to mind having his own words thrown back in his face. He shrugged. "You'll adapt. Besides, Maguire is a college graduate. Maybe you can learn a few things from him."

Spaceman gritted his teeth together tightly so he wouldn't say something he'd be sorry for later. Then: "Oh, shit," he said anyway.

He turned on his heel and left the office.

Blue nodded a polite farewell to McGannon and followed Kowalski.

He wasn't thrilled. The unexpected transfer was bad enough, but now Spaceman Kowalski had been thrust into his life. And just when he'd decided to give his all to the damned job and make a smashing success of it. This partnership was bound to put a crimp in his grand design.

Kowalski paused next to an amazingly cluttered desk and immediately plucked a thin file from somewhere in its depths. He didn't seem to know or care whether Blue was following him. In silence, they walked out of the building and across the parking lot, coming to a stop beside a battered Chevy. "You want to be wheelman?" Kowalski asked, finally acknowledging his existence.

"I don't mind," Blue said. He looked at the car again. "We can take mine, if you want. It's air-conditioned."

Kowalski looked as if he would rather get into the hot Chevy, just to prove some point, but then he shrugged. "What the hell." His voice was slightly husky, like that of a man who smoked and drank a little too much.

They walked a short distance across the lot to where the

Porsche was parked. Kowalski stared at the seafoam-green car for a moment, then looked up. "One question."

"Sure," Blue said, unlocking the door.

"You on the take? I don't need a crooked partner. I've got a reputation."

That was no doubt the truth, although what kind of reputation he had was probably open to debate. Blue knew what he was getting at, though, because it wasn't the first time the question had come up. Usually, of course, it was more subtle. "No," he said. "I'm not on the take. I'm just rich. Very rich."

"Okay, then." Kowalski got inside and settled his bulk snugly into the passenger seat. "If you're so fucking rich," he said, "why are you in this racket?"

"I like it."

"You like it?" The idea seemed to amuse him.

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Well, yeah. I guess. But I'm not rich."

Blue shrugged and started the car. "What's this case?" he asked, after a moment both men spent listening to the purring engine.

Kowalski lighted a cigarette. In an obvious afterthought, he held out the pack.

"No, thanks. I quit. Found out they were screwing up my endurance."

"Yeah? Interesting." Kowalski took a long drag.

Blue jerked the blower up another notch. "The case," he said again.

"Oh, yeah. Somebody killed a kid in Griffith Park. A very bloody knife job."

Blue released his breath slowly. "Bad."

"Very." Kowalski frowned suddenly, as if a more troubling thought had crossed his mind. But he didn't say anything.

Blue concentrated on driving. "I'll try not to fuck up your life too much," he said after several minutes.

"What?" Kowalski seemed startled; his thoughts had obviously been someplace else.

"I know you're not crazy about working with me." Diplomatically, he refrained from saying that the feeling was definitely mutual.

"Oh, hell," Kowalski said with a shrug. "Nothing personal. This happens all the time. You'll get fed up before long, and McGannon will let you off the hook."

Blue didn't have much hope for this partnership. Starsky and Hutch they weren't. They were just a couple of departmental loose ends that somebody was hoping to tie up by tying together. The only thing he could do was make the best of it. Go along for the ride. Most importantly, he had to show them that Blue Maguire was, above all, a team player. One of the boys.

Blue inhaled some of the drifting cigarette smoke. It tasted great.

Chapter 10

SPACEMAN had stopped counting the autopsies a long time ago. He tried to be there in person as the pathologist worked, instead of just getting the facts later in a written report. Not that he got off on watching somebody cut a stiff into pieces. It was just that seeing what had been done to some poor slob inspired the cop in him, made him even more eager to hit the streets, find the bastard responsible, and in his own mind at least, exact some measure of justice.

Over the years, there had been a lot of bodies.

His feelings never changed, though. And neither did the smell of the place. It was a more subtle stink than might have been expected, but it was also unforgettable. It lingered. On the clothes, the hair, the edge of whatever soul he still had left. It made him want to turn and run away as fast as he could. The old primal instinct to survive, ignited by a dumb fear that dying, like the flu or herpes, might be contagious.

But was the fear really so dumb? He wasn't sure. A cop could see so much death that it would finally wear him down, erode his humanity until there was nothing left. Spaceman figured that would happen to him eventually.

For now, he just swallowed the fear, trying not to taste it.

Almost forgotten next to him, Maguire sighed. "I really hate this place."

Spaceman shrugged. "All part of the job," he said, not wanting to let on that it was the place of many of his worst nightmares. "Let's get to it."

He led the way through the swinging doors.

Three of the tables were in use. Ignoring the first two, Spaceman walked to where a slender woman in white stood checking a cart of instruments. She glanced up as they approached. "This yours, Spaceman?"

"Lucky me. I get all the good stuff." He gestured over his shoulder. "You two know each other?"

"Never had the pleasure," she said.

"Maguire. My latest partner." If there was any sarcasm in the tone of the introduction, no one seemed to notice. "And this is Sharon Engels. Doctor Engels is a very kinky broad, who gets her kicks playing around with dead bodies."

Engels and Maguire smiled at each other.

Spaceman had never been able to figure out why a woman would take a job like this. It wasn't even like Engels was some kind of dog, either. She was a damned good-looking broad.

Unfortunately, she kept sidestepping his attempts to score. Despite that, it was one of his favorite fantasies, imagining what Sharon Engels would be like in bed. Probably a real tiger. Even now, wearing the damned lab coat, and with her usually untamed auburn hair pulled into a severe bun, she had the kind of stuff that got a man thinking. In her domain, sex and death coexisted.

After a moment of mental eroticism, however, he turned his attention away from her and toward the table. A skinny Chicano seemed bored as he finished hosing the body down. Water that was still rusty pink with blood swirled through the metal grating and disappeared into the tub below.

Spaceman stood to one side, keeping both hands carefully in his pockets. A habit here. He didn't want to touch anything by accident. Engels gave a fleeting look at the tray of specimen containers, syringes, knives and then switched on the overhead tape recorder. "The body is that

of a well-developed and well-nourished white male," she began in a measured tone.

Stretched out naked under the glaring lights, Peter Lowe looked even younger than he had in the park. The ugly slashes across his chest and stomach gleamed redly.

"Jesus." It was Maguire's voice.

". . . approximately sixteen years old . . . head hair is dark blond, eyes are blue, each pupil 3.5 millimeter in diameter . . . all teeth present. Fingernails are chewed very short."

Spaceman moved away slightly, carefully.

Engels worked slowly, precisely, giving the boy more attention in death than he had probably ever received in life. "Evidence of sperm present in the mouth and the anus . . . twelve slash wounds in the chest . . ." It went on and on.

Spaceman listened without expression to the familiar whirring of the small electric saw used to cut through the skull. Every once in a while, a case came along that got to him more than usual. This one, he knew already, was going to be one like that. Maybe it was the fact that the victim was a kid like Robbie and Robbie was missing. Whatever. Spaceman knew that he had to get the bastard who had done this. Maybe Peter's own father didn't care, but one cop sure as hell did.

Spaceman glanced sidewise at the pale but impassive face of Maguire. Even if breaking this case meant getting along for a while with Detective Perfect here, he'd do it.

Having decided to succeed and knowing that in the end justice would be done, Spaceman could bear to tune in again to the cool discourse of Sharon Engels.

In the hallway again, Blue leaned against the wall and wished that he could ask for one of Kowalski's damned cigarettes. Instead, he said, "I want a drink."

Kowalski raised a brow. "You drink on duty?"

"Not usually. I'll make an exception."

"Really bothered you, huh?"

"And it didn't bother you, for Chrissake?"

"Hell, I'm used to it."

Blue realized that Kowalski was lying. No matter how much he might deny it, the other cop was shaken by what had been done to that kid. Maybe the surly son of a bitch was human after all.

Kowalski flipped the end of his cigarette into the overflowing sand bucket in the corner. "Let's go," he said abruptly.

"Where to?"

"First to have a drink and wash the taste of this place out of my mouth. Then we're going to find that bastard." He turned and walked out.

Blue followed. The exit line had been corny and melodramatic, like a piece of dialogue from a bad movie, but he didn't mind. Somehow he was convinced that Spaceman Kowalski meant just what he said.

Chapter 11

THERE weren't many customers in the Red Dog Lounge. Aside from one fat woman perched precariously on a stool near the door, and two old winos arguing politics with the bartender, Tom and Jody had the cool dark refuge of the rundown bar all to themselves.

Which suited Tom just fine. The backroom and the pool table there belonged to them alone. His game was very rusty, because pool had been against the hospital rules, but that didn't matter. It felt good just to have a cue in his hands again, and there was no pressure in the playing. Jody, like him, was content to take it easy, play slowly, downing lots of cold beer and rapping about things that weren't important.

Tom felt great. The whole afternoon passed in a kind of golden fog, accompanied by the soft clicking of the balls hitting against one another and the taste of the thick dark stout.

When at last Tom managed to win a game from his brother, they replaced the cues in the rack and took their drinks to the last booth. A quieter mood seemed to descend on them suddenly. Jody began to build a tower of stale pretzels. "What're we going to do, Tommy?" he asked.

Tom took a slow sip of his Guinness. This was a moment he'd known would have to come sooner or later, and maybe now was as good a time as any. Except that the day had been so nice, so perfect, that he hated to lose the good feelings by talking about the past. But it had to be done. "Time to get down to business," he said regretfully.

"You said that before, and I still don't know what the hell you're talking about. If you want my opinion, I think we should just leave town. For a while, at least."

"We will. After."

"After what?"

"After we get even, Jody." He finished off the stout in his mug, then stood. "I'll get us a couple refills, then we'll talk, okay?"

He walked to the front and waited impatiently for the husky black bartender to pull himself away from a heated discussion of Reaganomics and do his damned job. "Hope I'm not interrupting," he said sarcastically, but softly.

The bartender just filled the mugs and pushed them across the bar at him.

Jody was still playing with the pretzels when he got back to the table. Tom took one of the nonessential pieces of the emerging structure and ate it. "You remember when they sent me away?" he asked suddenly.

Jody ducked his head and nodded.

"I promised then that I was going to get even with the bastard who did it."

"Who, Tommy?"

"The cop," he said flatly. "The dumb polack pig who busted me, and then told them in court that I was crazy."

Jody's eyes were squeezed shut. "I don't remember him," he said in a strained whisper.

"What do you remember, Jody?"

They had never talked about it.

Jody stayed quiet for a long time. "Well," he said slowly, "I remember some of what happened. But I don't like to think about it. I don't remember any of the cops, especially. They put handcuffs on you, I think. And they took me over to juvie hall in the squad car."

"What about the trial?"

"Maybe. Yeah, I remember some of that." He opened his eyes and stared at Tom. "Hey, you know, I've spent

years trying to forget all that. Everybody said the past doesn't matter. Maybe it's better that way. Don't you think we should just let it go, Tom?"

" 'Let it go?' 'Everybody said the past doesn't matter?' Who the hell said that?"

Jody bit his lip, as if trying to recall the words. Then he shrugged. "Just friends."

"Friends?" Tom felt a surge of anger. He grabbed Jody's wrist and squeezed hard. "These friends mean more to you than I do, is that it?"

"No. No, of course not, Tommy."

"You want to forget everything that happened back then? Is that what you want?"

Jody shook his head. "No, I don't. And you know it. Would I be here if that was what I wanted?" His voice was low. "I just want to forget the bad. I want to remember all the good things, Tommy. Really. Would you let go before you break my goddamned wrist?"

Tom released his grip. "Okay. Maybe that works for you. But not me. I have to remember it all. Like the pig who dragged me away. He's the one who split us up."

"I know. But if we try to get back at him, there might be trouble." Jody's hands roamed across the tabletop, finally closing around the mug. "Shit, man, they'll send you right back."

"They have to catch me first, and that won't happen, not this time."

Jody sighed and shook his head. "So who's the cop?"

"Kowalski." He spit it out like a dirty word. "His name is Kowalski."

Just saying it aloud brought the past flooding back, washing over Tom like a tidal wave.

That summer had been hot, too, just like now. Day after steaming day of unrelenting heat. The four of them seemed trapped in the damned little house. No air conditioning.

Not enough money to get away even for a few days to someplace that might be cooler. Nothing. Just the four of them rubbing against the edges of one another in the simmering days and nights.

Tom was not quite twenty then. He worked part time pumping gas, but that didn't pay enough for him to be able to get out and find a place of his own. Besides, there was another reason why he couldn't go.

Their father was always out of work. He claimed that it was because of his bad back, an old war injury. But Tom knew that was just a crock of shit. The old man was nothing but a lazy son of a bitch. The only things he was good for were boozing, screwing, and beating on his sons. He was a huge bear of a man, towering over the rest of the family.

Life with him had been the same for as long as Tom could remember.

Their mother wasn't any help. She always made Tom think of a limp grey dishrag. She'd spend hours bitching about life to anyone who'd listen, but she wouldn't lift a finger to help herself or her kids. She liked the booze, too, and she liked fucking. The two of them went at it a lot, and they made a lot of noise about it.

When they were very young, Tom and Jody would crawl under the blankets and try to cover their ears against the grunts and groans coming from the other side of the thin walls. Later, as they got older, the whole thing became a dirty joke, able to disgust and excite them at the same time.

Tom hated his parents, hated the pigsty of a house where they were all trapped, hated his whole damned life.

Except for one thing. The only thing that kept him there and made it all bearable. Jody. His little brother was thirteen that summer, a boy who somehow managed to stay bright and happy even there. Jody was the one he loved, the one who loved him. That made the rest unimportant. In their bedroom was a secret and wonderful world all their own. A world that no one else knew about.

Until that terrible day in July.

It was pretty dumb, of course, to fool around like that in the middle of the afternoon. Usually they played the games only at night, when their parents were sleeping, or as was most often the case, passed out. The dark hours belonged to Tom and Jody.

But it was so hot. And the damned little fan he'd spent a whole week's pay on did nothing except move the sluggish air from one corner of their room to another. They just started goofing around a little to help them forget how hot it was and how boring.

The problem was, once they got started, it was hard to stop. A little teasing got serious too fast. Pretty soon, it was too late to stop.

Then the bitch opened the door.

Tom took a gulp of beer quickly.

Jody was watching him.

He pressed the cold wet glass to his forehead and smiled weakly. "Shit, it's just waiting to ambush me."

"What?"

"The past, little brother. The goddamned fucking past."

"That's what I mean. Maybe it's better to forget."

"No. I told that dumb porker that I'd get back at him someday. That was a solemn oath, Jody. I can't get on with my life until it's taken care of."

"I understand. I just don't want them to send you back."

"Everything will be okay. Promise." He reached across the table, this time covering his brother's hand gently. "It's just you and me. The two musketeers."

"Just like before?"

"You got it."

After another moment, Jody took a deep breath. "So," he said. "What next?"

Tom smiled and pulled his hand back. He'd known that Jody wouldn't let him down. Never. "What next. Good question. I've been thinking about it for a long time. I've had a lot of ideas. Maybe blow up his house. Maybe shoot him. I just haven't made up my mind yet what's best."

"Whatever you say."

"Right now, I say one more round. Then we'll split from here and pick up some wheels."

Jody frowned, still thinking about the damned truck. They had dumped it earlier, after taking off the plates and wiping it as free of prints as possible, just in case. Then he just nodded and got to his feet. "I'll get the beer this time," he said.

Chapter 12

It turned into the worst kind of L.A. day. October in July. The Santa Ana blew relentlessly, spilling acrid smoke over the Pacific. The smell of the fires hung above the city, serving as one more irritant to a population already chafing. Something would have to give, sooner or later.

Spaceman's mood was no better than anybody else's.

It was already fifteen minutes into the next duty shift when he slammed down the phone after one more unsuccessful attempt to find out anything at all about Peter Lowe. Vice had no file on him, nor did the local juvenile authorities. The only fact they had so far came not from anything they had done, but from the pathologist's report.

Most of what was contained in the report had been expected. One thing was not: Two men had killed Peter Lowe.

That information immediately gave the case a slightly weird aspect. Sex crimes, which this certainly seemed to be, were usually one on one. But according to Engels, the varied angles of the knife wounds indicated two distinct sets of injuries, one inflicted by a right-handed person, the other by a leftie. Further, specimens of semen found on the body confirmed the two-killer theory.

Finding that out did absolutely nothing to improve Spaceman's mood. Neither did something he found tossed on top of his in-basket. The terse memo was from up north, near Lompoc. A teenaged boy had been found dead by the highway. He'd been stabbed to death and the Lompoc cops were trying to get an ID on him. There was no picture, although one was supposed to be on its way.

There was only a description that might have fit any number of boys. Peter Lowe, for example. Or even Robbie Kowalski.

But Spaceman pushed that thought aside; what the hell would Robbie have been doing in Lompoc? He folded the memo and put it into his pocket. Chances were it didn't have a damned thing to do with their case, but he'd check it out. Tomorrow.

"Time to quit," he said.

Maguire settled into the desk opposite his, looked up. "What?"

"I said, shift's up. Time to go home."

The blond frowned. "I hate to leave with nothing done on this."

"Take my word for it, we can leave. Nobody's going to pick up our ball and run with it during the night."

Blue acknowledged that with a shrug and reluctantly closed the file.

Spaceman's phone rang. He looked at it balefully. "I'm off duty," he said. But the damned thing rang again.

"Might be important," Maguire said.

"Did it ever occur to you that the fucking telephone runs our lives? That it runs all of Western civilization?"

"It never even occured to me that this city was a part of Western civilization," Maguire replied. "Answer the damned phone."

"Shit." But he answered it. "Homicide."

"Officer Kowalski?" It was a woman's voice, very soft and timid.

"Detective Kowalski," he corrected. "Can I do something for you, ma'am?"

"My name is Mary Lowe."

It was hard to hear above the racket of the squad room, but the name came through loud and clear. "Yes?"

"Peter is. . .was my son."

"I see." He stuck a fingertip in his free ear so he could hear her better.

"You're the policeman who spoke to my husband earlier, aren't you?"

"Yeah. You must be calling about the body."

"Yes, about that."

"Good. I didn't think you'd just want him dumped in a hole out here and forgotten."

She made a sound that might have been a sob, but which was muffled so quickly that he couldn't be sure. "My husband is a stubborn man. He won't change his mind about that."

Spaceman swore at the ceiling. "You don't need his permission to bring your son's body home."

Maguire was watching him, listening to the one-sided conversation with interest.

"I can't go against him. Maybe that seems wrong to you, but it's the way my life is." She sounded resigned.

"Then I don't understand why the hell you're calling me."

There was a pause before she went on. "I have some money saved. Money of my own. It's not much, just fifty dollars. If I send it out there, will you see that Petey has a decent burial? Maybe some flowers?"

"You want to send me fifty dollars to bury your son?" he said, primarily for Maguire's benefit.

"It's the best I can do." Her voice seemed higher. "God knows, it's the best I can do."

"Okay," Spaceman said shortly. "I'll take care of it."

"Thank you." Another moment passed. Then: "I know what you must think of me. A woman who would treat her own child this way. But that's how life is sometimes. He's the head of the family, and I can't go against him."

"That's your business, Mrs. Lowe. My only concern is finding out who killed Peter."

"You don't know that yet?"

"Not yet."

"Can you tell me how it happened?"

"He was stabbed to death."

"My poor baby. I hope he didn't suffer much."

Although it wasn't asked as such, there was a question plainly audible in the words. Spaceman thought about the body. For one bitter moment, he wanted to tell this stupid and pathetic woman the truth. Maybe she should know about the pain and fear Peter must have gone through before dying. Maybe she should know that he must surely have greeted death with relief when it finally came. At sixteen, he was glad to die.

But he didn't say any of that. Without even knowing why he should spare the feelings of this woman, Spaceman lied. "He didn't suffer much," he said flatly. "Peter died quickly, without much pain."

She sighed. "We can thank the good Lord for that anyway."

Spaceman had a bad taste in his mouth, and he knew that unless this conversation ended quickly, he'd let her have the truth right between the eyes. "Anything else, Mrs. Lowe?"

"No. Just. . . I'll send the money right away."

"You do that. And I hope it helps you to sleep nights." With that, he hung up.

Maguire was still looking at him.

"That dumb bitch doesn't have the backbone of a rabbit," he said, maybe to justify his parting shot.

Maguire just shook his head, then said, "How about going across the street? I'm buying."

Spaceman knew that he had to get out there and find Robbie, but he also knew that a drink was just what he needed at the moment. "Why not?" he said. "As long as you're buying."

The Lock-up was always busiest at shift change. They picked up a couple of beers and worked their way through the crowd gathered around the television, watching a ballgame. A hand-lettered sign over the bar proclaimed the desire to outlaw liberals and not guns.

Spaceman hated that sign. He wasn't crazy about liberals or guns, but at least liberals didn't kill people. No more than the right-wingers did, anyway. Most killers seemed pretty apolitical, in his experience. He lit a cigarette. "I know a couple places downtown where boys like Peter crash," he said. "Tomorrow we'll make a run past them. Of course, it'll be a damned waste of time."

"Will it?"

"Sure. But we have to make the effort. We have to justify ourselves."

"To whom?"

"To whom?" Spaceman smiled faintly, then shrugged. "Mostly to us, I guess."

Maguire was looking at the sign. "I wonder what drives kids like that."

"What drives anybody?" He was thinking about Robbie. Where the hell could he have gotten to?

"I feel bad about the kid."

"We all feel bad. So what?"

"Maybe I could ante up for a funeral. Would that be okay?"

Spaceman studied him over the top of his beer bottle. "Why should you?"

"No reason. I'd just like to. I can afford it."

"That's right. I forgot you're loaded." He shrugged. "Fine. Bury him if you want to."

"Somebody should care." Maguire sounded defensive.

People seemed to keep telling him that he didn't care. Didn't they know how tired he was? What the hell did they

expect out of him? "Maybe. If anybody has room to care." Spaceman was still looking at the other man. "How long have you been in Homicide?" he asked.

Maguire smiled. "What time is it now?" He shrugged. "I've been in Robbery. And the department PR office."

"Public fucking relations?"

He shrugged. "Not my choice. Can I ask a question now?"

Spaceman knew what was coming. "What?" he said anyway.

"Why 'Spaceman'?"

Everytime he got a new partner, it was the same thing. Sometimes he made up elaborate stories to explain away the nickname. One dumb shit now working for Internal Affairs still thought that Kowalski had been one of the original seven astronauts. But tonight he was too tired for games. "About a million years ago," he said, "I was in Nam. Somebody over there tagged me with it. We spent a lot of time flying pretty high in those days. If you catch my drift."

"I remember."

Spaceman was surprised. "What was a rich bastard like you doing in that sewer? I thought your type knew all about how to avoid dangerous drafts."

"I enlisted."

"Shit." He shook his head. "You really are a major fuck-up, aren't you?"

"Some people have said so." Maguire shifted gears again. "You have some kind of problem?"

"What?"

"All day I've had the feeling that something besides the case is bothering you."

Spaceman was mad at himself for letting it show. "It's personal," he said flatly. "As in, my business."

"Sure. Okay. Didn't mean to trespass."

Maybe he'd sounded like a bastard, but the last thing he needed right now was to have this guy feeling sorry for him. Anyway, Robbie was his son and his business. "Gotta go. See you in the morning," he said more quietly.

"I'll be there."

Probably right on time, too. Spaceman finished his beer in one gulp and left.

Chapter 13

NIGHT promised to be no cooler than the day had been. Already sweating, Spaceman sat behind the wheel of his car and studied the list Karen had given him earlier. Not one of the names on the neatly typed sheet seemed even vaguely familiar, and it dawned on him that he didn't really know anything at all about his son's friends or his son's life. Pretty pathetic, that. But what the hell could he do about it? The boy wouldn't talk to him.

Things would change. When he found Robbie, they'd sit down and have a good long talk.

Finally, he just picked a name and address at random. A start had to be made someplace and it might as well be with Roger Fellows, whoever the hell he was. Or should that be whomever?

As he angled the car in the direction of the San Diego freeway, Spaceman peered toward the hills. Although the radio was saying that half a dozen fires were still burning, he couldn't see anything but the slight haze. It was early for such an outbreak, but the hot, dry spring had made the whole area prime fire territory.

Hell, it was always something around here. Fires, mudslides, earthquakes. Or else all the television actors went on strike. There was no middle ground in Los Angeles.

Long Beach was changing. Six city blocks had been torn down to make way for a shopping mall costing, rumor said, in the neighborhood of a hundred million. Spaceman would have sold the whole damned city for half that price.

The Fellowses lived just a few blocks from the house

Spaceman used to own, until the divorce took it away. Karen and Robbie still lived there. The Fellows' place, like his former residence, was a small tidy box covered with aluminum siding. The lawn was neatly trimmed, but beginning to turn brown because of the water shortage. That was one advantage of living in a fifth floor apartment in the big city. No damned lawn to worry about. Just muggers and dogshit.

Standing on the front porch, which really wasn't a porch at all, but just a four-foot square of concrete, Spaceman could hear a television blasting, as well as the steady hum of an air conditioner from inside. He pushed the bell.

Raised voices in the house seemed to be debating the issue of who should respond to this obviously unwanted intrusion. After several moments, the door was opened by a middle-aged man wearing the uniform of a city bus driver. He eyed Spaceman warily. "Yeah?" he said.

Although he hadn't really planned to go official on this, there was something in the man's tone that made Spaceman decide to play it differently. He pulled out his shield case and flashed it. "Mr. Fellows?"

"That's me. What do the cops want here?"

"I'd like to talk to your son Roger, please."

A look of weary exasperation crossed the ruddy face. "What's he done now?" There was a twang in his voice, the memory of someplace else. Maybe Missouri. Oklahoma. He was another seeker. When people in other places didn't like the lives they had, they headed west. They kept moving until there was no more land and then they stopped and waited for the good things to start happening.

Fellows looked like he was still waiting.

"He hasn't done anything, as far as I know," Spaceman said. It was a familiar lament: 'What's he done now?' Somehow tonight it seemed to ring louder than usual. "I'd just like to talk to him."

"Well, I guess you might as well come in." Fellows moved aside just a little.

Spaceman squeezed through the doorway and found himself in the living room. A plump woman dressed in shorts and a flowered blouse was sitting on the couch. One hand held a can of Tab and the other a paperback romance. On the table in front of the couch was a bottle of beer and a large bowl of potato chips.

"What is it?" she asked, staring at Spaceman.

"A cop," her husband said in disgust. "Wants to see Roger."

"He's been home all day," she said quickly. "So whatever happened, he couldn't of had anything to do with it."

"Nothing's happened," Spaceman said. "Can I talk to him?"

"He's in the backyard. I guess you can just go on through. Unless you need us to be there." Fellows glanced at the television as he spoke. The ballgame was all tied up.

"No, that's all right."

Relieved, Fellows returned to his beer, his television.

Spaceman walked down a short hallway and into the kitchen, a spotlessly clean room that smelled of lemon freshener, and more strongly, of an apple pie that was cooling on the table. The sight of the pie reminded Spaceman that he hadn't had any supper.

He opened the door and stepped out into the postage-stamp backyard. A boy, wearing only cut-offs, was stretched out on the ground, smoking what looked like a legal cigarette, and staring at the sky. "Roger?"

A slow hand lifted to remove the cigarette, and the boy rolled on his side to gaze up at him. "Hey," he said with a smile. "You're a cop." He spoke in the languid, spaced-out way the kids cultivated even when they weren't stoned.

"Right the first time," Spaceman said.

"Not hard." He relaxed onto his back again. "You'll

never take me alive, copper," he said in a lifeless Rich Little-doing-Cagney routine.

"William Morris is looking for you, kid."

"Who?"

"Never mind." Spaceman lowered himself into a flimsy lawn chair that teetered dangerously under his weight, but held. "Let's talk about Robbie Kowalski."

"Kowalski? Why? What'd he do?"

"Nothing. I only want to know if you've seen him lately."

Roger blinked in his direction. "If he ain't done nothing, why should I say anything to a cop? How do I know that what I'm saying won't get a buddy into trouble?"

"He a good friend of yours, is he?"

"Rob's okay. For a polack. He's a little slow sometimes, but I figure that's like genetic, right?"

"By the way, I'm Detective Kowalski."

A chuckle. "His old man?"

"Right again. You're on a roll."

"Shit. No offense meant. It was a joke."

"Have you seen Robbie lately?"

"What's going on? He split or something?"

"He hasn't been home for a couple days. His mother is concerned."

"Yeah?"

"Have you seen him?"

"Nope."

"When was the last time you did see him?" Spaceman kept his voice level, although he wanted to grab the punk and give him a good shake. He hated working with juvies.

"Couple weeks, I guess. Rob's been a little weird lately."

"What's that mean?"

"Just. . .weird."

"He doing drugs?"

"Hey, man, that's getting a little personal, you know?

Rob's just into his own head trip right now. I guess he'll come home when he's ready. Tell the old lady to hang loose."

Spaceman wished he could smash his fist into the smiling face. Just once would make him feel a lot better. But he didn't do it. "Rob might be in trouble," he said quietly.

"We're all in trouble, sir. The whole fucking world. Haven't you heard? I think it was in all the papers."

Spaceman was tired of him. He stood. "Do you know anyplace Rob might hang out?"

Roger ground out the cigarette in the dry grass. One blade caught and smoldered a little. He quashed it with his thumb. "Try Fat Jack's on Pacific Coast."

"Thanks."

"You didn't hear it from me."

"Right." Rather than dance another round with the senior Fellowses, Spaceman walked up the driveway and back to his car.

Chapter 14

As Blue drove home, he listened to the latest news reports about the hill fires. Over 50,000 acres gone already. Four dead. A stable of expensive horses wiped out. The account of the disaster, recited in the cool measured tones of the female reporter, worried Blue. If the winds changed by even a couple miles, the flames would get pretty close.

But then he pushed the worry aside. No sense getting himself into a panic about it; there wasn't a damned thing that Blue Maguire could do about the wraths of nature.

Once he was home, it was simple to relax a little. He poured a glass of Chateau Lafite '69, and slid into the hot tub. Immediately, life started to look better. He directed his consciousness toward only two things: the rippling of the water in the tub, and the smooth taste of the wine.

Sensual, tactile things.

Back in college, Blue had made some visits (six, actually) to a shrink. Nobody ever knew about the therapy, but Blue felt as if it had helped. It was Foreman who taught him the ability to relax. The technique of clearing all the garbage out of his mind and centering on the simple. Like the feel of the hot water swirling through his toes and the soothing effect of the wine as it glided down.

Originally, the exercise had been intended to rid him of the ubiquitous and destructive spectre of his father. And it worked to some degree. But more importantly, the ability to withdraw from the world temporarily helped save his life in the war. Blue was convinced of that.

By the time thirty minutes had passed, he felt invincible. Forgetting a towel, he got out of the tub and padded wetly into the bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed for a

moment, then picked up the phone and dialed before he had a chance to think about it.

Pamela answered on the first ring. "Oh, it's you," she said.

"It's me, yeah."

"What is it, Blue?"

"Look, babe, I've been thinking. Do we really want to leave things the way we left them? I thought maybe we could get together, have some dinner, talk about it."

"It's all been said."

"No, I don't think so, Pamela. I mean—" He broke off and took a sip of wine.

"Blue, let's not stand around watching the death throes of this relationship."

"That's not what I'm doing."

"We've had some meaningful times, but it's over. I've faced that fact; why can't you?"

Meaningful times? The broad was a walking compendium of triteness. "So that's it then?" He was almost hoping she wouldn't change her mind at the last moment.

"Yes, that's it and I've got to run."

Dispensing with good-byes, he hung up.

Fuck her.

He pulled the phone book from the shelf and thumbed the pages quickly, looking for the name he wanted. She might be married, for all he knew, or shacking up, but it was worth a try. The important thing was to move ahead, not to dwell on the end of still another relationship. Get right back on the old horse.

Engels, S. That was probably it. An initial usually meant a woman living alone. He hoped. The address was in Los Angeles proper, on Wilshire.

This time, he paused for just an instant before picking up the phone. But then he moved; what the hell. He had nothing to lose.

She answered on the first ring, too.

"This is Blue Maguire," he said. "We met today."

"Maguire?"

"I was with Kowalski." And I must have made a great impression, he reflected glumly.

"Oh, sure, Spaceman's partner. What can I do for you?" Her voice was brusque and businesslike, but not unfriendly. "Do you have a question about the post today?"

"No, this doesn't have anything to do with that. I was just wondering if you'd have dinner with me." He swore at himself for the bluntness of the invitation.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "I guess I could take the frozen pizza out of the oven," she said finally, sounding amused.

"Forty-five minutes?"

"Fine."

Blue hung up. Invincible, that was the word.

Sharon Engels lived in a middle-aged apartment building that was equipped with a doorman. She was waiting in the lobby, talking to the uniformed old man when Blue arrived. He watched her walk across the room. The light summer dress did a lot more for her body than had the white lab coat, and now wild curls fell to her shoulders.

Blue was glad he'd worn the new suit.

There was an awkward silence as they walked from the building to the curb. She admired the car, then indicated the squawk box. "Always in touch?"

"Only when I want to be." Which was almost always, but he didn't say that. "I made a reservation at Jimmy's," was what he did say. "That okay?"

She nodded, looking mildly impressed.

Blue wondered about that. Sometimes maybe he tried too hard. Usually, probably. He had to work on that, maybe once in a while suggest Taco Town.

At the restaurant, they each had a cocktail while studying the menu. When the waiter returned, Sharon chose veal *à l'orange,* and Blue picked the poached salmon. The mechanics of decision provided a topic for some conversation, but once the order was placed and another round of drinks served, silence fell again. She seemed very interested in the decor.

"Well," he said finally and unoriginally, "do you like your job?"

"Yes. Very much. Do you find that bizarre?"

"Should I?"

"Some men do." She tasted the vodka tonic. "Of course, there are also some men who get turned on by the idea. Death as an aphrodisiac."

"I don't think I belong in either category."

"Oh?" She sounded skeptical.

"I just think a job should be enjoyable."

"Do you enjoy yours?" She smiled. "I ask, because obviously you're not in it for the money."

"I like it." Again he could have said a lot more, but didn't.

"How do you get along with Spaceman?"

"Kowalski? Well, it's only been one day. But he's definitely different."

"One of a kind." Her face grew serious, and Blue wondered just what the relationship was between Sharon and his new partner. "I've seen him work. He's very good."

Blue nodded. "Yes, I think maybe he is." Even if he didn't give a flying fuck about having a good working relationship. Maybe he just hadn't heard about that great sense of camaraderie cops were supposed to have.

Sharon played with the thin plastic stir stick. "You two have anything on the twenty-seven thirty-four?"

"What?"

"The boy who was killed."

"Peter Lowe? Nothing yet."

And with that, they reached an unspoken agreement not to talk about work anymore. They talked about themselves instead. College—her time at UCLA, his at Harvard. He told her something of his time in Nam. She gave him a fast rundown on her brief marriage to a brilliant but troubled young surgeon.

Over the baked Alaska, Blue decided that he liked Sharon Engels. A lot. The realization made him nervous. If there was sóme way to screw up a relationship, he'd find it.

They lingered over coffee and brandy, until she remembered an early appointment. He thought she was sincere about that, not just making an excuse to end the evening.

He hoped so anyway.

Chapter 15

THE CHINESE DINER had yellow plastic tablecloths and a jukebox with music left over from the Fifties. They had chow mein and egg rolls and listened to Gogi Grant. They both ate too much, even finishing off the fortune cookies that always tasted like cardboard to Tom. His fortune said, "Be diligent and you will prevail." He liked that.

Jody read his fortune, frowned, and threw the tiny slip of paper into the ashtray without telling Tom what it said. "Let's go," he said instead.

Before getting into the car, they walked across San Pedro to a mom-and-pop store for a six-pack. The interior of the Ford was so hot that even rolling down every damned window didn't help; all it accomplished was to blast them in a continuous stream of oven-baked air. They each popped open a beer immediately and headed out Wilshire.

With no real destination in mind, Jody simply guided the car up and down the traffic-clogged streets of Hollywood according to Tom's whim. The sticky night had brought out a lot of whores, creeps, and hustlers. Nobody seemed to have much energy, though. It was as if the continuing hot spell weighed them down, so they were just going through the motions of high-speed life.

They cruised for a long time. Tom was enjoying the hunt and didn't want to rush. As they searched, he allowed himself to wonder, fleetingly, what was going to happen this time. But then he pushed the thought aside quickly.

"How about him?" Jody asked finally, motioning with one hand.

The boy he'd indicated was standing alone in front of a

gay movie. He was slender, fair, wearing tight white pants and a red silk shirt. "Maybe," Tom said, staring at him. He chewed his lower lip. "Yeah, maybe."

But as they watched, a tall skinny black in a purple jumpsuit appeared. He greeted the boy with a hug and they both went into the movie.

"Shit," Tom said. Then he shrugged. Plenty more where that one came from.

It was almost ten minutes before Tom saw him, the one he wanted for sure, standing on the corner of Hollywood and Vine, of all places. "Stop," he ordered Jody.

Jody managed to pull to the curb, squeezing in next to an old VW bug. "Which one, Tommy?"

Tom pointed. "Him."

The chosen one had light brown hair that just covered his ears, and was wearing blue jeans with a plain white tee shirt. His face was arranged to display perfect and exquisite boredom as he leaned against a sign post and took long lazy drags on a cigarette. There was something about him that seemed to glow, that made all the others seem shabby by comparison.

"Yeah," Jody said. "I like him." His voice sounded strangely tight.

Tom looked at him sharply, then nodded. "Okay. Go get him."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Bring him over here."

Jody took a deep breath. He pounded both hands lightly against the steering wheel, then quickly opened the door and slid out.

Tom leaned forward a little so that he could watch as Jody walked to the corner and spoke to the boy. The boy smiled and nodded in return. It was weird, but just watching the two of them talk was giving Tom a warm itch inside. He ran one hand across the front of his jeans, then

pulled it away quickly. "Not yet," he muttered through gritted teeth. "Not yet, damnit."

After a time that seemed endless, Jody and the hustler came over to the car. Jody opened the door and the boy slid in. "Hi," he said. "I'm Chris."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Tom."

Close-up, Chris smelled of lime aftershave. "Jody here said you wanted to have a little party. Just us three."

"Right. Does that sound like a good idea to you?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Why not?" Tom reached over the seat and pulled out another can of beer. He offered it to Chris. "Hot tonight."

"For sure. You were lucky to catch me here, you know? I was invited out to this big bash in Malibu. A bigshot TV producer asked me to come, but I decided it was too hot for the hassle."

"We were lucky," Tom said.

Chris took a long gulp of beer, then smacked his lips together. "Good shit. Anyway, this producer, he's thinking about using me in a new series. I'm an actor," he added.

"No kidding?" Tom fished out another beer and opened it. "You done something I might've seen?"

Chris frowned. "Well, I haven't actually done anything yet. But I go to a lot of auditions. And once I even got a callback. But then that part went to some creep who was related to the producer."

"That's life, I guess."

"Yeah. But something's gonna break for me soon."

Jody was quiet, just listening to them talk as he guided the car through the clogged streets.

Chris swallowed more beer. "Where's this party gonna be, anyway?"

Tom thought about that for a moment, then shrugged. "I like Griffith Park," he said. "There might even be a breeze around."

"Okay with me. If we can dodge the bastards from vice."
"No problem. It's a big park."
Tom smiled and lifted his beer again.

Chapter 16

FAT JACK'S turned out to be just the kind of place Spaceman was expecting it to be. Greasy burgers, watered-down Cokes, and a lot of loud noise that wasn't even a reasonable facsimile of music, as far as he was concerned. In addition, a flourishing trade in controlled substances was being carried on in the parking lot.

He left his car, which was making some funny noises anytime he went over thirty, on the street and braved Jack's. He realized that every person in the crowd made him for a cop instantly, but that didn't matter. In a place like this, it didn't pay to be subtle.

He reached out at random and plucked a skinny waiter by the arm. "The manager?" he shouted.

The pimple-faced kid stared back at him stupidly. "Huh?"

"I want to see the boss."

That got him a nod in the direction of a closed door. Spaceman didn't bother to say thanks; he also didn't bother to knock on the door.

It could only have been Fat Jack himself in the office. The man couldn't have weighed less than three hundred pounds, and that was probably guessing low. He had a television turned on, the volume blaring so that it could be heard above the noise in the restaurant. Several cheeseburgers were on the desk in front of him.

When Spaceman came through the door unannounced and uninvited, the fat man was busy pouring orange soda from a quart bottle into a large glass of ice. His tiny eyes studied and dismissed Spaceman with one scathing glance. A hand reached for the remote control device and the

volume on the television vanished; the picture flickered on. "I already made my cop drop for the month," he said. The voice was rusty, as if it didn't get much use.

"Did you now?" Spaceman pulled a chair closer to the desk and sat down.

"If you're trying to raise the ante, go screw yourself." He spoke and bit into the burger at the same time.

"I don't give a flying fuck about your sweetheart deals with vice or the narcs," Spaceman said almost lazily. Which wasn't exactly the truth, because he had never believed that anybody else should be making more at the job than he did. He made a mental note to snoop around a little and find out who was making his scratch from this dump. "You Jack?"

"Mr. Feldman, to you."

"Whatever. I'm looking for someone. A kid. I'm told maybe he hangs out here."

With one more bite, the first burger was gone. "Half the little pricks in Southern California hang out here, but I don't pay them any more attention than I have to."

Spaceman reached into his pocket and pulled out the picture of Robbie. "This face look familiar?"

"None of them look familiar," Feldman said, not raising his eyes.

Spaceman leaned closer, practically shoving the picture into Feldman's face. "Look again, maggot." His voice was very soft.

The eyes flickered. "Shit," he said, reaching toward the desk drawer.

Spaceman tensed a little, moving one hand in the direction of his shoulder holster.

But all Jack removed from the drawer was a pair of glasses, old-fashioned bifocals. He perched them on his moon face. "Oh, that's Rob," he said.

"You do know him then?"

"I recognize my employees when I see them."

"Robbie works here?"

"Worked. As in, I canned him about two weeks ago."

"Why?"

The fleshy shoulders moved a little. "He had a case of sticky fingers. Nothing big, but it happened."

Spaceman felt like he'd been gut-kicked. This creep was telling him that Robbie, his son, was a thief? "You sure about that?"

"I'm sure, but it was no big deal. They all do it. Kids. A certain expectation of loss is built into the prices I charge." Feldman didn't seem much bothered by the wholesale theft apparently going on around him. "Rob's problem was, he was stupid enough to get caught. That meant I had to let him go." The second burger had somehow vanished. "What'd he do to get you guys on his case?"

"He's missing."

"Runaway?"

"Looks like."

Jack shook his head. "Makes a man glad he never had no kids."

"Can you tell me anything about Rob?"

"What's to tell? These punks are all alike." Feldman seemed to reach deep inside and pull out a thought. "Maybe Rob had something bugging him lately."

"What? Do you know?"

"What the hell do I look like? Dear fucking Abby? I don't listen to what they say. I ain't a father." The third and final burger was disappearing fast.

Spaceman tried to ignore the crack; Feldman didn't know that he was the father in question. "Is there anybody around here who might be able to help me?"

"He came to work with another kid. Lom. I think maybe they're friends."

"Lom here tonight?"

Jack redonned the glasses and consulted a hand-drawn

chart on his desk. "Should be. In the kitchen. Short, slanty-eyed kid."

"Okay, Jack." Spaceman stood.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"You might let it be known that I cooperated, you know."

Spaceman smiled slightly. "Hoping for a discount in your monthly ante?"

"Can't hurt to try."

The smile broadened. "Sure thing, Jack. Just tell me who you're in bed with at the department, and I'll see what I can do."

Jack stared at him for a moment, then shrugged. "Fuck you."

Spaceman shrugged and left the office.

The kitchen could never have passed a health department inspection, so Feldman must have been greasing a few palms down there, too. There was certainly enough grease on the stove, the walls, and the floor of the kitchen for a liberal coat on every greedy palm in the state.

Two kids, one black and one who looked Vietnamese, were standing over the stove. "Lom?"

The boy glanced his way. "Yeah?"

"Let's talk."

"I'm busy."

Spaceman reached out and gently pulled the spatula from his hand. He gave it to the other boy, who muttered something under his breath about white men who liked to perform unnatural sex acts with their own mothers. Spaceman smiled at him. "Let's talk," he said again to Lom.

They walked over to stand in the doorway. The screen was propped open in the foolish hope of attracting a stray

breeze. All that had been attracted so far were a lot of flies.

"If you're from Immigration, all my papers are in order. I'm legal."

"Glad to hear that. Where's Rob Kowalski?" he asked abruptly.

The bright black eyes wavered a little and then a mask seemed to drop over Lom's face. "Rob? Beats the hell out of me. I've been wondering the same thing. We were supposed to go to a movie the other night, but he never showed."

"What kind of problems has he had lately?"

"Problems? The same ones as the rest of us, I guess." His English was very good. "Who the hell are you anyway? Why are you asking me about Rob?"

Spaceman swatted away some of the flies trying to lick the salty sweat from his face. "I'm his father."

There was a slight drawing away. "The cop?"

"Right."

"Well, man, I don't know where he is. Maybe he just dropped out and went to live on the beach. He was really tired of the scene around here."

Spaceman stared at him for another moment.

Lom returned the look. He lifted one shoulder. "Maybe he went to San Francisco."

"Why?"

The boy seemed to lose patience with him. "Maybe he wanted to see if there are any hippies left. How the hell do I know?"

"So you don't know where he is?"

"All I know, man, is flipping the fucking hamburgers."

Spaceman looked at him, then gestured. "Okay. Get back to it."

Lom went back to what he knew.

Spaceman went home. It was late and he still hadn't had any supper. He didn't really want to call Karen, but he knew that she'd call him sooner or later. So he dialed her number while peering into the fridge and trying to find something to eat.

"At last," she said when she heard his voice. "Well?"

"Well what? I haven't found him yet."

"Do you think that something's happened to him?"

"I don't think anything yet." He found some Hebrew National bologna and pulled it out, along with some bread and an almost empty jar of French's mustard. He was trying to forget what Lom had said about Robbie going to San Francisco. The memo about the dead boy in Lompoc crackled in his pocket.

"What next?"

"I keep looking. He'll turn up."

"You don't sound very concerned."

Spaceman sighed. "I'm concerned. But it's just been a real long day."

Karen asked him to keep in touch and he said he would. They hung up.

He remembered then that he'd never called Mandy. But he just couldn't take any more tonight. He made a sandwich, poured a glass of milk, and went into his bedroom. *Casablanca* was on the late show, and he watched it, stretching out on the bed to eat the sandwich.

Chapter 17

He was a nice kid and they all had a good time.

Chris talked a lot, and he dropped the names of almost all the big stars in Hollywood, trying to make it seem like he knew them personally. Clearly it was all just a bunch of lies, but Tom didn't mind. He thought it was kind of sad, in fact, that Chris felt he had to try so hard to make people like him. Tom liked him fine, just the way he was, without the lies.

They found a quiet corner in the park, behind a large stand of trees near the picnic grounds. The moon was up by then, and bright. Chris accepted a cigarette from Tom. "We didn't talk about price," he said hesitantly.

"Price?"

He nodded.

Tom shrugged. "Whatever's fair." He felt sorry that everything in life had to have a price tag attached, even friendship.

"Twenty?"

"Sure, why not?" He made the deal easily, not even stopping to think about it.

With that out of the way, Chris seemed to relax, but Tom could tell that Jody was still uptight. He kept looking around, although they were obviously alone. The whole park belonged to them.

Tom stretched out, relaxing, feeling number-one fine. "Why don't you and Chris get to know each other better?" he suggested to Jody.

Jody licked the sweat above his upper lip. "What about you?"

"I'll just watch for a while."

There was an awkward moment, with Chris and Jody looking everywhere but at each other.

Tom felt a twinge of impatience. "Come on," he said sharply.

Chris made a move, reaching out to unzip Jody's jeans. He put a hand inside. Jody, his eyes locked onto Tom's face, gave a sigh. Chris smiled sheepishly and bent over him.

Tom could feel the itch beginning again inside, and this time he didn't fight it. He took a swallow of beer and thought about the first time.

He'd been sixteen and Jody just ten.

They'd had the house to themselves that day, because the old man was working for a change, and their mother was at the hospital visiting her sister, who was dying of some female thing. All the women in her family died of some female thing, and the stupid bitch was afraid that she would, too.

Jody was playing little league ball that year. He came in from a game, sweaty and dirty, and went to clean up. He'd hit the first home run of his life, winning the game for his team, and he was puffed up with pride.

A few minutes later he came into the kitchen where Tom was eating lunch. "You shoulda been there, Tommy," he said for about the tenth time. Still wet from the shower and wearing just shorts, he poured a big glass of Kool-Aid. As he drank, he got a purple moustache.

"Next time," Tom promised. He felt a sudden urge to hug his little brother, to let him know how proud he was. Jody needed to know that no matter how bad things got at home, Tom would always be there for him.

He crossed the room quickly and put both arms around him, pressing against the skinny wet body. "That was great, Jody," he said in husky voice. "I'm real proud."

Jody didn't pull out of the embrace for a long time.

Tom sometimes thought that their whole lives were decided in that one moment when Jody didn't pull away. The only thing he couldn't ever quite figure out was whether he should love Jody for that moment or hate him.

Jody moaned softly. The sound pulled Tom back into the present. He blinked away the memories. Chris spit into the grass a couple of times, then took a gulp of beer.

It was Tom's turn. He unsnapped and unzipped his jeans as Chris moved toward him. Jody was sitting up now, watching. Tom smiled at him, then closed his eyes and gave himself up to the wonderful feelings he was having inside.

It was real and it was a dream of the past all at the same time. He could almost believe that the practiced mouth of the hustler really belonged to somebody else. Somebody still ten years old with a grape-flavored tongue.

Tom really didn't mean to kill Chris.

The knife was in his hand.

He didn't know how it had gotten there or why he had it. Chris was flaked out on the ground, the jeans still tangled at his feet. Tom looked at him, then at the knife, surprised to find himself holding it.

"Tommy. . ." It was a whisper from Jody.

Tom looked up and met his brother's gaze. There was a long moment, during which neither one of them seemed even to breathe. Chris broke the mood. He sat up suddenly and reached for the beer can. Without even thinking about what he was doing or why, Tom bent forward and plunged the knife into Chris' spine. A faint scream, more a whimper than anything else, escaped the boy as he toppled over.

"*Oh God,*" Tom said to himself. Then panic seized him. If Chris told anyone what he'd done, they'd send him back

to the hospital again. He yanked the knife blade free and pushed it into Chris again. Again and again. It got easier.

Finally he turned and handed the knife to Jody. "Now you," he said.

Chris was still twitching, making soft mewing sounds.

Jody gripped the knife with both hands. "I can't," he whispered. "Please."

Tom leaned very close to him. "For me," he said softly. "Do it for me."

Jody shook his head. He stared into Tom's eyes, then glanced at Chris. "He hurts so bad."

"Yes," Tom said. "He hurts. I hurt."

Jody nodded once. Then he closed his eyes. "I'm sorry." He lowered the blade quickly into Chris.

Tom felt another hot wave of excitement wash over him. "Again," he said hoarsely.

Jody did it again and then so many times that Tom lost count.

Tom stayed on his knees, his body wracked by an explosive climax, better than any he'd ever had before. Jody finally stopped. Tom crawled over to him and pried the knife free from a death-like grip. Then he held Jody's hands until the sobs faded and died.

They were hungry.

"That's the trouble with chink food," Tom said. "It doesn't stick with you long."

They found a MacDonald's and drove through the pick-up window for Big Macs, fries, and shakes. It was only a short drive back to the motel.

They spread the meal out on one of the beds and ate in silence. Tom finally slurped the last of the chocolate from the bottom of the paper cup. "Tomorrow we get down to business," he said.

"The cop, you mean?"

"Kowalski the pig."

Jody crumpled his empty cup. "Does that mean no more parties?"

Tom grinned. "You like the parties?"

Jody shook his head.

"Don't lie. You like them just fine."

"I feel sorry for Chris," Jody said in a faint voice. "It's terrible what happened to him."

"Yeah." Tom didn't know why the evening had ended that way. "He might have been a famous actor someday."

That was too sad to talk about, so they cleaned up the mess and went to bed.

Jody lay awake for a long time, listening to Tommy snore. There was an ache in his gut that wouldn't quit. He felt like he had once before, way back, when his brother had taken him to a playground near their home. It was very late at night and nobody else was around. Jody got onto the small merry-go-round and held on tightly to the metal bar as Tommy began to push. The merry-go-round went faster and faster, blurring the world.

He closed his eyes and screamed for Tommy to stop, please, but the merry-go-round just spun more quickly. Above the sound of the wind crashing around his ears, he could hear Tommy laughing.

Jody pressed the heels of both hands into his eyes, wanting to scream again, wanting Tommy to stop what was happening. He kept thinking about the fortune in his cookie at the Chinese place. "Beware that your love does not lead you astray," it said.

Beware, Jody thought. Beware.

Chapter 18

BLUE was already out of bed when the call came.

He had finished twenty minutes of aerobics, showered and shaved, and was in the kitchen preparing a bowl of Grape-Nuts. The sudden shrill ringing startled him, causing his hand to jerk, splashing a puddle of milk across the counter. "Damn," he said mildly, then answered the phone.

"Blue?"

"Yes?" He ripped off a paper towel and tried to wipe up the milk before it ran down the side of the cupboard to the floor. "Who's this?"

"It's me. Spaceman."

He recognized the slightly raspy voice then, and wondered when they'd reached a first name basis. But what the hell. "What's up?"

"My fucking car won't start. Pick me up, okay?"

"No problem." Blue shifted the phone to his other ear and fumbled for a pencil so he could write down the address. "Be there as soon as I can."

Spaceman hung up without saying good-bye.

Blue listened to the dial tone for a moment, then shrugged and hung up, too. Maybe too much emphasis was put on the old social amenities anyway.

He carried the bowl into the bedroom, eating the hard cereal as he got dressed. His mood was good. Last night's dinner with Sharon Engels seemed like a promising beginning. It was just possible that his life was starting to turn around. There was, of course, still the problem of Kowalski to deal with, but in the morning light, even that seemed manageable.

He whistled softly as he pulled on jeans and a white Izod. Maybe casual was the way to go with his new partner. Blue was willing to make accommodations. He clipped the .357 Magnum to his belt and took a lightweight jacket from the closet. The good guys had to keep their guns covered, on the theory, he supposed, that it made the general populous nervous to see naked guns flapping around.

It was a little more than thirty minutes later when Blue pulled to a stop in front of an apartment building on Vermont and leaned on the horn. When nothing happened after a minute, he honked again. Kowalski came barreling out. He was wearing slacks and a sport jacket that had never been intended to be seen together, but at least the shirt was clean.

"Change of plans," he said, sliding into the car. "We've got another stiff in the park; headquarters just called."

Blue made a sharp righthand turn and headed toward the park. "Another kid?"

Spaceman was leaning back in the seat, his eyes closed. "What? Oh, yeah, another goddamned kid."

"Damn," Blue said.

"Yeah. And I didn't have any breakfast."

They drove through the park to the place where a couple of zone cars and a lab vehicle were already parked. The area was roped off, and a small group of sightseers stood behind the bright orange restraining lines. Joggers, maybe; what else would anybody be doing in the park so early?

It wasn't until Blue had pulled in behind the other cars and turned off the engine that Spaceman spoke again. "How much this thing set you back?"

"About thirty grand. Give or take."

"Give or take. Shit."

They got out together and headed across a patch of rugged terrain. A rookie cop standing nervous guard was

still a nice shade of chartreuse. Obviously relieved to see them, he stepped aside and pointed.

It was the worst thing Blue had seen in his time as a cop. Maybe he'd seen worse in Nam, but that was a long time ago and mostly buried in memory. "My God," he whispered, looking down at the bloody fetal shape curled in the grass. It seemed an especial obscenity on this warm and sunny morning in the park.

He turned away quickly to stare at a couple of joggers who were running in place and chatting. An early morning pick-up.

"Just like the Lowe boy," Spaceman said.

Except that they both knew this was worse, for one very good reason. With the first killing, no one knew what they had. Maybe it was a one-time thing. An act of personal passion, no matter how sick and twisted that passion had been. There was always the chance that Peter had brought about his own death, that something in his actions or personality caused someone to go a whole lot crazy suddenly and kill him.

Which didn't make his death any less tragic, but which at least meant that it was a single incident, terrible but isolated.

But this body put the lie to that. This body meant that they were dealing with a genuine crazy. Or, if the two-killer theory was correct, a couple of crazies.

Blue was tired just thinking about it. For one moment, he almost missed the PR department and making speeches to the Rotary Club.

Spaceman knelt beside the body, just looking at it for a long moment. "Pictures?" he asked no one in particular.

"Done," the recovering rookie said.

He reached out and gently turned the body so they could see the face. It was a very young face, still boyishly pretty, unmarked by the brutal attack the body had endured. Spaceman said something under his breath that no one could hear.

Blue watched him.

Spaceman fumbled at the jeans that were tangled around the boy's feet and finally pulled out a wallet. He handed it to Blue.

Inside was an ID card, the kind that some schools issued to students. The picture on the card was of the dead boy; he was very photogenic. "Christopher Blair," Blue said. "There's an address in Pasadena, but that's been marked out. The new one is the Starlite Hotel, on Fairfax."

"I know the place."

Another van pulled up and parked.

"About time," Spaceman muttered.

Sharon Engels climbed down and walked over to where they stood. "Sorry about the delay," she said. "But they're stacked up to the ceiling already today. Old folks dropping like flies from the heat and from breathing the air. Not to mention a couple of amateur firefighters. Heart attacks."

"We have another dead boy," Spaceman said shortly, not seeming very interested in all the other people dying in L.A. that day.

Sharon pulled on thin plastic gloves and bent over the body. "Thanks again for dinner last night," she said, not looking up, both hands already busy.

"Any time," Blue said. He could feel Spaceman's curious gaze move over him, but luckily they were interrupted.

One of the uniforms came up, holding two bloody tee shirts. "Found these over there," he said. "Looks like they washed up in the drinking fountain and left them behind."

Blue opened an evidence bag and the two shirts were dropped in. "That was careless of them."

Spaceman shrugged. "They probably knew that the shirts wouldn't help us a damned bit. With the weather the way it is, two guys running around half-dressed won't attract any attention."

Sharon joined them. Her face was wearily grim, but she still looked good. Maybe it was the cheekbones. She

yanked at the gloves until they peeled reluctantly away from her skin, and shoved them into her black bag. "I wonder how long this damned heat is going to last," she said.

They both shrugged.

"Everybody always talks about a full moon making people crazy," she went on, taking out a cigarette. Before anyone could move to light it, there was a Bic in her hand and it was done. "But for my money, a heat wave like this is worse. Wonder if anybody's ever done a study on that."

Blue didn't say anything. He recognized the seemingly idle chatter for what it really was, an attempt to get away from the horror of it all for a moment, to steady herself. He had done the same thing himself in the past. They all had.

She glanced back toward the body, which was being readied for transport. "This is just preliminary," she warned.

"Sure," Spaceman said.

"It looks like a match to the other killing. There's only one real difference that I could spot immediately."

"What?"

"This one was a lot worse. Escalating degree of violence, I think they call it."

"That's what they call it," Blue agreed.

"That's it, then?"

"For the moment, Spaceman. You want to be at the post?"

But he shook his head. "Not this time. I don't need a rerun. Just get the data to me as soon as possible." He turned and started for the car.

Blue hung back. "Mind if I call you again?" he asked, feeling like a junior high nerd talking to the prom queen.

"Call." She smiled fleetingly and left.

He watched until she was back in the van. When he slid

behind the wheel of his car again, Spaceman was smoking a cigarette and staring into the distance. "Where to?" Blue asked.

"I don't give a damn." Then he sighed. "To a telephone. But not the office. I sure as hell don't need to get trapped into listening to one of McGannon's pep talks." He glanced sidewise at Blue. "Unless you're a stickler for details like checking in."

Blue shrugged. "I'm flexible."

"Good," Spaceman said, and Blue had the feeling that he'd passed some kind of test. "We'll track down the Pasadena address, see if his family is still there." Spaceman tossed the cigarette out the window. "Put the phone someplace where I can get some breakfast."

Blue nodded and aimed the car toward San Fernando Boulevard and Biff's Coffeeshop.

Chapter 19

WHILE Spaceman downed a western sandwich, Blue checked out the address found in Blair's wallet. The family, whatever that might consist of, apparently still lived at the same place. It had been decided that they would go break the news in person.

Blue went back to the table and sat down opposite Spaceman, who was just finishing his meal. He was plainly lost in thought, and once again Blue had the feeling that something beyond the case or even the unwanted partnership was bothering him. Having learned his lesson the day before, however, he kept his mouth closed.

The coffee he'd ordered was cold now, but Blue drank it anyway. "The phone is listed to a Charles Blair," he said.

Spaceman nodded and wiped the napkin across his mouth. "That's our next stop, then," he said, reaching for his wallet.

The house was a stucco bungalow, painted a bright shade of pink. The lawn, what there was of it, needed trimming. They parked in the unpaved drive. The house and the green car clashed painfully in the vivid sunshine.

Since Spaceman seemed quite content to stand back for the moment and let him take charge, Blue led the way to the door and knocked firmly. He didn't know what game his partner was playing now, but he was willing to hang in there. If nothing else, a background in public relations taught the art of diplomacy.

The door opened slowly. A woman stood there, but it was hard to see her inside the dim hallway. "Yes, what do you want?" The voice was overly precise, as if it belonged

to an English teacher or a drunk. Blue tagged this one as a boozer. Not a falling down drinker, but a careful sherry sipper.

"Mrs. Blair?"

"I am Felicia Blair, yes. Who might you gentlemen be?"

"Detectives Kowalski and Maguire, ma'am, from the Los Angeles Police Department."

"Which one are you?"

"Maguire. May we step inside and speak with you?"

"Well, I suppose so. One wants to cooperate with the authorities, of course, although I cannot imagine what business the police could have with me." She unlatched the screen door and pushed it open. They entered, following her toward the living room.

Blue came to an abrupt stop on the threshold, staring. Several hundred framed pictures covered every available inch of wall space in the room. A closer look revealed that they weren't pictures at all, but the covers of movie magazines, some from as far back as the Forties and some quite recent. Each cover had been placed within a plastic frame of red or blue and hung with care.

Spaceman nudged him from behind and they walked on into the room. *The Phil Donahue Show* was on the television. Once inside, Spaceman again seemed to lose interest in the proceedings. He appeared quite content to wander around the room, studying the walls.

There was something frightening about the room. Granted, everybody in Southern California lived a media-soaked life, where nothing was real until and unless it was on the screen or in *People* magazine, but Mrs. Blair's little world went even beyond that. This room had slipped over the edge of tenuous reality into the madness that hovered all around, like the smog.

"I see you've noticed my collection," the woman said.

"Hard to miss," Spaceman replied.

She ignored him, looking at Blue instead. The

expression on her face could only have been described as coy. Her hair was tightly curled, her face elaborately made up. The brows had been plucked and then pencilled in again; the mouth was a vivid red slash across her face. Although she probably wasn't much over forty, she looked more like something preserved from several decades earlier.

Her gaze simmered as she took Blue in from head to toe. "Young Redford," she pronounced at last. "That's what you are. A young Redford type."

"Uh, thanks," he said. He pulled out his notebook, hoping it would make things seem more official and less like a trip into the Twilight Zone. "You have a son named Christopher Blair?"

She shook her head vigorously, but the curls didn't even flutter. "No. I was never blessed with a child of my own."

"But you do know him?"

"Of course. He's my husband's nephew. We've raised him since he was four, after the tragic accident that killed his own parents. So even though I was not blessed to give birth to him, Chris is very dear to me." It sounded like a speech she'd given before; it also sounded like a speech from an old Bette Davis movie.

"Well, I'm afraid we have some bad news for you. Chris was found this morning—"

"Found?" she broke in cheerfully. "But he hasn't been lost. Chris lives in Hollywood." She said it with the fervor a true believer might use to speak of Mecca.

"At the Starlite Hotel, right?"

"Yes. We decided that was a better place from which to launch his career. Chris is an Actor." Capital letter.

Spaceman made an impatient sound.

Blue took the hint. "I'm sorry to have to tell you, Mrs. Blair, but Chris is dead."

"What?" Lacquered fingertips sprang to the scarlet mouth, but Blue couldn't tell how much of the emotion

was real and how much staged. "Dead? Oh, no, you must be mistaken. It must be some other boy you're talking about. Chris is going to be a star."

"I'm afraid someone killed him," Blue said gently. "His body was found in Griffith Park."

She shook her head impatiently, angrily, rejecting this sudden thrust of reality into her dream world. "No."

"Yes," Blue said firmly.

"Chris is a wonderful actor. Who would kill him? Who would harm him at all? He's the sweetest boy."

"We don't know yet who killed him."

Spaceman, who had been studying a *Movie Screen* cover trumpeting an affair between Burt Reynolds and Loni Anderson, turned suddenly. "How old was Chris?"

"He's sixteen."

"Isn't that a little young to be on his own? Especially in a place like the Starlite?"

She drew herself up and now Blue thought of Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*. "The Starlite Hotel is the residence of a number of promising young theatrical figures," she said with great dignity. "The giants of the business frequently lunch in the chic little cafe there."

Spaceman snorted. "Crap, lady. The giants of the business wouldn't use the toilet there because they'd probably catch something."

She fixed him with an icy glare. "Obviously one does not expect a person of your type to understand the film world. A boy like Chris needs to make contacts."

"Right," Spaceman said in obvious disgust.

Blue stepped forward. "Mrs. Blair, Chris is dead," he said softly, but firmly. "Someone killed him."

She looked at him, her mouth opening as if more protest might be forthcoming, then something within the woman seemed to crumble. She folded like a dying flower and sank to the couch. "Chris? But he was going to be a star. We had it all planned."

Blue touched her shoulder lightly. "Is there someone we can call for you?"

They called her husband, and since he worked only minutes away, he arrived quickly. Obviously, Charles Blair didn't share the lofty visions of his wife or his late nephew. He was a thin, nervous-looking man with a twitch.

He didn't seem surprised to hear about Chris, although his twitch got a little worse. "He was my brother's boy. Nice, kid, Chris, but a dreamer. Flighty, like my wife. The two of them were always at the movies or reading through those damned magazines." He glanced across the room at his wife, who was showing Spaceman a scrapbook devoted to Chris. "I always thought the boy was a little. . . strange. Not normal, if you get my drift."

"We think he was picked up by someone for sexual purposes, then killed."

Blair nodded. "I thought it might be something like that. The poor kid."

There wasn't anything more to be learned from these people. Blair agreed to come in for an official ID, and at least they were willing to bury the boy. In fact, she was already making plans for the funeral when they left. Blair saw them to the door and stood there, twitching and looking bothered as they got into the car.

"Hooray for Hollywood," Blue said.

Spaceman slammed the car door too hard. "Goddamned fucking Tinseltown," he said.

Chapter 20

It wasn't the first time Spaceman had been to the Starlite Hotel. Back when he was still in uniform, he'd been called out a number of times to the rundown establishment. Most of the complaints were minor—drunk and disorderly, domestic squabbles, an occasional drug OD, once a knifing. Just the ordinary kinds of things for a place like that.

Once upon a time, back in the late Forties and early Fifties, the Starlite had worn a mantle of respectability. Rumor had it that a couple of real stars actually lived there before they made it big. That rumor was enough to bring more hopefuls flocking to the tiny rooms and haphazard service. It didn't take most of them long to realize that Hollywood held nothing for them except hurt. Nevertheless, the dream persisted.

The lobby never changed, only got more like it was. The gloomy lighting did nothing except hide the worst of the stains on the rug. All the stains looked alike, so there was no way of telling which were blood, which booze, which other things that didn't bear thinking of.

On this particular day, it was occupied by several rummies and a couple of kids. The old-timers were playing a slow-motion game of poker, while the kids read the trades.

Spaceman and Blue walked through the dismal lobby to the front desk, which was under the command of a woman dressed entirely in yellow. She could have been fifty or seventy. Blue hair was piled onto her head in a display Marie Antoinette might have envied. A small fan on the

counter was blowing air right at her, but it did not seem to have much of a cooling effect on her plump redness.

Obviously an old hand at her job, she watched their approach suspiciously. "Nobody called the cops," she said when they reached her.

"How do you know that, sweetheart?" Spaceman asked, leaning across the counter toward her.

"Because I work the switchboard," was the snippy reply. Not easy to scare this broad.

"And you listen in on all their calls, right?"

She ignored that.

Blue was standing to one side, hands shoved into his pockets, rocking back and forth patiently.

"Chris Blair's room," Spaceman said.

"He ain't in." She smiled prettily. "Would you like to leave a message?"

"I'd have to wait a long time for an answer. Blair is dead."

She swallowed hard. "Dead?" Her voice raised, attracting the attention of the kids in the lobby. They looked up from *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*. The old men didn't bother. Death was no novelty to them.

"Blair was found murdered in Griffith Park this morning."

"How tragic. He was a very nice boy."

"Was he? Then I'm surprised he lasted very long around here. This place chews nice kids up and spits them out pretty fast. We want to see his room."

"Why?" She fumbled for an explanation. "I mean, he wasn't killed here or nothing. I don't know why you have to see his room. A thing like that gets around, it could get us a bad name."

"But not nearly as bad as the name I could give you," Spaceman said cheerfully.

She thought that over for a moment, then turned and took a key from the board behind her. "Room 203."

"Thanks so much."

As they climbed the stairs, their progress was followed all the way by several pairs of eyes. "They don't know whether to feel bad because somebody they knew is dead," Spaceman muttered, "or glad because it isn't them."

"We all do the same thing," Blue replied. "Remember Nam?"

Spaceman conceded the point silently.

Chris Blair hadn't had much to call his own. The room held an iron bedstead, made up with an oft-patched quilt, a desk and chair, and a chest of drawers. A cheap black and white portable television was sitting on the dresser, the current *TV Guide* open next to it.

Inside the drawers were only the usual underwear and socks, the expected plastic bag with a small amount of hash, toilet articles in a paper bag, ready to be hauled to the john at the end of the corridor. In the closet were several pairs of jeans, some shirts, and a grey flannel blazer complete with dress shirt, blue slacks, and regimental tie.

There was a pile of paperbacks on the desk. A French-English dictionary, some Nick Carter thrillers, and a motley collection of stage plays.

Spaceman made a face. "Depressing as hell in here."

"Maybe Chris liked it."

Before Spaceman could reply, there was a soft knock on the door. They glanced at one another, then Spaceman moved to answer it.

The girl standing there was perhaps sixteen, wearing jeans and a halter top that she didn't yet have the figure to carry off well. Her face was pretty enough, just like that of thousands of other girls. She had wide blue eyes, freckles, and not a chance in hell of making anything of herself in this town.

"Is it true?" she said in a slightly quivering voice. "About Chris being dead?"

"It's true. You knew him, did you?" Spaceman asked.

"He was sort of a friend of mine." She chewed on a fingernail. "Who killed him?"

"We don't know yet. Maybe you can help us."

She shook her head. "I don't know nothing. Chris was just a friend, you know? Nothing else." Surprisingly, she was still able to blush; Spaceman wondered how long she'd been here. "He didn't make it with girls, so we was just friends." She suddenly seemed to realize that she'd lost the edge of toughness necessary for life in the jungle. "Anyway, I don't screw around with guys who can't do me no good, careerwise, you know?"

They knew.

Spaceman was lighting still another cigarette. "So you can't tell me anything about who might have wanted to hurt Chris?"

"No. It was probably just one of those creeps he used to trick with. I saw him yesterday, and he was flat. He was going out to score." A sudden flash of knowledge older than her years sparkled in the blue eyes. "I guess he did. Score, I mean."

"Looks like." Spaceman could feel the taste of the cigarette searing his lungs, and he wondered how long it would be before his craving for nicotine killed him. "What's your name, sweetie?"

"Brooke Kane."

"For real?"

The smile was engaging and in a fair world she might have gone far just on the strength of that. "No. But I think it works, don't you? See, when the producers hear it, they'll think about Brooke Shields. When they can't get her, I get a break."

He could have pressed her for a real name, even hauled her in, but it would have been pointless. He couldn't run in every kid on the lam. It wasn't his job. So he just waved her out.

She turned to go, then paused. "Can I ask you something?"

"Ask."

The smile flashed again. "What's gonna happen to his TV?" she said brightly.

Chapter 21

ALL that got done for the rest of the day was a lot of wheel-spinning. Spaceman was used to that; it was an occupational hazard. They nosed around the area of the Starlite a while, but it wasn't the right time of day to converse with the street people, even if they wanted to pretend that the crazies and druggies would know anything. Or tell it if they did.

When the autopsy results finally showed up, they simply confirmed what was already known. What they had was two boys, two street hustlers, killed by the same hands in two days. And as far as Spaceman could see, there wasn't a damned thing he or anybody else could do to prevent a third body from popping up the next day.

Disgusted at the sense of futility that he was feeling, Spaceman gave it up for the day. The night men would pay special attention to the boys of Hollywood; beyond that, there wasn't much to be done. He called the garage, but his car wasn't ready. It made a perfect end to a perfect day.

He took out the memo from Lompoc and stared at it for a moment. Damn, there just weren't enough details. The dead boy might have been anybody; there was no reason for him to think it was Robbie. His hand rested on the telephone for a moment; simple enough to call and find out some hard info.

Then he pulled his hand back. Damnit, just because some creep said Robbie might have headed for San Francisco there was no reason to think it was the truth. There was no reason at all for Robbie to have been in Lompoc. And there was very little chance that the killing there was connected with the ones here.

He decided not to call Lompoc yet. They should have a picture down here soon, and if no photo turned up, it meant they must have identified the dead boy. No sense in borrowing trouble.

Blue came back from someplace and leaned against his desk. "I just heard that your son is missing," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Dwight told me."

"Dwight talks too damned much."

"Was it supposed to be some kind of secret?"

Spaceman shrugged. He didn't even know now why he hadn't wanted Maguire to know. It was dumb. Still, he felt obligated to try and justify himself. "I just don't like people who bring their problems to the job. It gets in the way."

"Admirable," Blue said. "Why don't you let me help? I've got a lot of time and nothing much doing."

But Spaceman shook his head. Maybe he was just being a stubborn ass—all right, no maybe about it—but that was how he felt. "Thanks, but no thanks. I can handle it."

"Your car ready?"

"No."

"I have one you can use."

Spaceman drew back and glared at him. "You have another car besides that fancy hot rod outside?"

"Just a Jeep. In my garage at home."

He hesitated, not wanting to be obligated. That was the trouble with getting close to other people; it meant losing some of your control.

"Hey, you have to look for the kid, right?"

"Yeah." He thought suddenly of the dead boys and the fact that his own son was out there somewhere. "Yeah. Okay. Thanks."

Spaceman turned down the first invitation to stay for something to eat, but when Blue asked again, he decided what the hell, and agreed.

The house they parked beside was all redwood and glass, making his own place seem even shabbier by comparison. Maguire didn't gloat over it, at least. In fact, he seemed almost embarrassed by the house, at the same time that his fondness for it was obvious.

Spaceman wondered how rich a person had to be before his wealth was an embarrassment.

Blue stopped long enough in the living room to pour them each a shot on the rocks and then led the way into a large kitchen. Most of Spaceman's apartment could have fit into the one room. "I better warn you, I'm not much of a cook," Blue said.

"Hell, I eat out mostly. Or make some of that frozen shit." He sat down at a round butcher block table and started to work on the drink. The whiskey was smooth all the way down.

Blue opened the refrigerator door and peered inside briefly, before starting to pull things out: lettuce, a lemon, some eggs. Cheese. "You sure I can't lend a hand looking for Robbie?" he asked, putting a pan of water on the stove and starting to wash the lettuce.

"I'm sure. But thanks." Spaceman looked for an ashtray and finally found one across the room. He brought it back to the table. "This is just something I have to do. The department has a missing person report, so I'm not exactly doing a solo." He smoked and drank in silence for a few moments. "I haven't been much of a father, maybe," he finally said in a low voice. "This seems like a way to make up for that." He cleared his throat.

Blue nodded but didn't say anything. He squeezed the lemon and tossed the lettuce with some olive oil.

"Speaking of crazy names," Spaceman said, although they hadn't been, "how'd you get stuck with something like Blue? Sounds like a name for a dog."

"It was, actually," Maguire replied. "My old man had a hunting dog that he loved more than anything else in the

world. He always said that dog was the bravest, smartest, most loyal creature he'd ever known. So he over-ruled my mother's choice, David, and named me Blue." He shrugged.

Spaceman wondered if the story were true; whether it was or not, Maguire seemed determined to stick with it. He dropped the subject. "Thought you said you couldn't cook," he said.

Blue smiled sheepishly. "My old man was a real freak on food. He always had the best cooks money could buy working for him. I got used to the good stuff, so I learned a few tricks."

"Why don't you just hire somebody?"

Blue shrugged. "I like my privacy. Besides, it kind of relaxes me after a rough day. Like today."

Spaceman finished his drink and crunched thoughtfully on an ice cube. "Nothing wrong with that," he said. "They say some of the best cooks are men. Probably all of them aren't weird."

Blue just smiled a little. For the next few minutes he was very busy grating cheese, cooking the eggs fleetingly, and slicing some crusty French bread. When the Caesar salad was ready, he opened a bottle of California wine and joined Spaceman at the table. "What do you think about this case?" he asked as they started eating.

Spaceman speared a crouton with his fork and frowned at it. Or at the question. "I think it's gonna be a bad one," he said. "Real bad."

Chapter 22

THE JEEP moved easily down the steep road that led away from Maguire's castle, back to ordinary life. Spaceman had to admit to himself that he felt better after the food and wine. Maybe Maguire wasn't such a creep, after all.

Not that he was looking to get stuck with him permanently, of course. He liked working alone; but until McGannon could be persuaded to divorce them, Kowalski figured he could get along with Maguire.

He'd already picked another name from the ones Karen had given him. Becky Malloy, the only girl on the list. She lived in a fancy part of town and the sight of the house confirmed that there was money in the family.

The woman who answered the door had the class to go with the neighborhood and the house. She was outfitted for tennis, in a short white dress with some kind of ruffled thing underneath. The clothes were right for the game, but it was clear from the unruffled hair and the perfect make-up that she hadn't set foot anywhere near a tennis court. Her tan was flawless and the figure inside the dress nearly so.

Maybe, Spaceman thought, if I could find a woman my age who looked this good, I'd give up the young stuff.

Which reminded him that he hadn't called Mandy yet.

The woman eyed him speculatively. He got the impression that she looked at all men the same way, testing them to see if they met her standards.

Spaceman had the feeling that he came up a little short on her acceptability scale.

To compensate, he showed her the badge and made sure

she caught a glimpse of his gun as he replaced the wallet. Sometimes the rich bitches got turned on by an implication of brute power.

It seemed to work with her. A wet tip of tongue appeared, flicking along the frosted pink lips. "What can I do for you?" she asked.

"Is your daughter here?"

"Becky? No, not at the moment." But she stepped aside and ushered him in anyway.

He liked the living room. Done all in muted shades of blue and green, it gave off a sense of coolness.

"What did you want to see Becky about?"

"I was hoping she could help me locate my son. Robbie Kowalski."

"Robbie is missing?"

"Seems to be."

She smiled at him. "Excuse my rudeness. Please, sit down. How about a drink?"

He relaxed into the plump-cushioned sofa, but shook his head to the drink. "Do you know when Becky will be back?"

"No." She remained standing. The better to show off her health spa figure, no doubt. "I honestly don't think she'd be able to help you anyway."

"She's a friend of Robbie's, right?"

"Well, they were close at one time, but . . ." She broke off suddenly and glided across the room to a bar in one corner. "I think a little chablis would be just marvelous. Do say you'll join me?"

He gave in with a shrug. "Becky and Rob?" he said, when she came back to hand him a glass of sparkling gold liquid.

"They broke up about three weeks ago."

"Broke up? Why?"

She hesitated. "Because my husband and I insisted."

Spaceman took a sip of the wine; it didn't taste as good as it looked. "Why? If you don't mind telling me."

She considered her drink. "You mustn't think it had anything to do with Rob personally. He seems like a very nice boy."

"But?"

"They just weren't suited to one another. I mean, their backgrounds and..." The words dwindled off uncomfortably.

"Becky comes from here and Rob is the son of a cop, right?"

"That's a little blunt, but accurate. Becky has other interests that we feel she should be pursuing right now. Next year she's going East to school." The woman shrugged. "I think you can understand our concern."

"I understand that you thought Rob wasn't good enough for your daughter."

"Please, don't be hurt by what I said." She scooted a little closer to him on the couch. He was suddenly aware of the perfume she wore, a heavy, cloying scent. "Your job must be terrifying, what with all the animals on the streets these days."

"There are all kinds of animals," he said. "In all kinds of places." The room that had seemed so pleasantly cool before now struck him as a sterile, unfeeling place. Cold, not cool. "When will your daughter be home?"

She looked like she might want to pout, but then she shrugged instead. "Well, to be honest, I'm not sure. She went to spend a few days with a girlfriend, and I expected her home today. But she hasn't turned up yet."

"What girlfriend?"

"Why do you need to know that?"

He smiled. "I need to talk to Becky."

She leaned forward and very carefully set her glass on the polished table. He had the feeling that she wouldn't be

buying any tickets for the next policeman's ball. "I will call my daughter," she said tightly. Lady of the manor addressing the stableboy. "I will ask her to come home immediately. I don't want her to be humiliated in front of others. The girl's father is in the state legislature. How would it look for a cop to come knocking on his door asking for Becky?"

Since he didn't know how it would look and he didn't much care, Spaceman didn't say anything.

She left the room.

Spaceman finished the wine. He probably wouldn't be offered any more. Or offered anything else, for that matter. Too bad. He could use a broad with some class for a change. Maybe he was hanging around Maguire too much and a taste for the expensive stuff was starting to rub off.

Spaceman made another note to himself to call Mandy.

It was several minutes before Mrs. Malloy returned. Her uppity attitude had apparently suffered a blow.

"What is it?"

"They said Becky wasn't there."

"When did she leave?"

Mrs. Malloy shook her head. "They said she never was there. I don't understand. Becky told me she was going to stay with those people. Why would she lie?"

Spaceman sighed. "So Becky is missing, too."

"No, she's. . . ." The woman shuddered and sank down onto the couch. "Do you think they're together?"

"I think it's very possible."

She made a small sound, half sigh, half sob.

Spaceman decided that she could use a dose of liquid courage, so he went to the bar and poured her some more wine. Then he poured a shot of Irish for himself. He smiled faintly. So the little bastard was shacked up someplace with a rich bitch.

Spaceman put the dead boy in Lompoc out of his mind.

Chapter 23

BLUE was restless.

He paced the living room for a while after Kowalski left, decided to hell with it finally, and left the house. Maybe he could do something about finding the kid on his own. He'd seen the picture of Robbie and it couldn't hurt to hit some of the places in Hollywood where runaways congregated. Hell, he could do some digging about the dead boys, too.

It would look very nice on his record if he somehow managed to catch the killers.

At the end of a couple hours, though, all he had managed to catch was a headache. He was allergic to marijuana, and just inhaling the smoke in some of the places he visited got his allergy raging. He found a drugstore on Sunset and went in to buy some antihistamines.

After swallowing a couple of capsules on the spot, he found a phone and called Sharon Engels.

She answered the call immediately, and said, in response to his question, that she wasn't doing much of anything.

He suggested going out for a drink.

She said it was too hot.

He suggested that maybe he could just come to her place.

She said that tomorrow was going to be a very busy day, so it would have to be an early evening.

He said okay.

She said okay.

Before leaving the drugstore, he bought a quart of Rocky Road ice cream.

She answered the door wearing shorts and a thin tee shirt. No bra. Rocky Road, as it happened, was her favorite flavor.

They sat on the living room rug, eating ice cream and watching a *Rockford Files* rerun. The first time he kissed her, she tasted like cold chocolate. It was a good taste, so he kissed her again.

Sharon Engels apparently didn't believe in playing games. She pushed herself up from the floor and carried both dishes into the kitchen, where she rinsed them carefully. Then she turned and stared at him thoughtfully. "I don't usually go to bed with cops," she said.

"Why not?"

"They usually don't appeal. All bravado and bluster."

"Does that apply to me?"

"I don't think so." She grinned suddenly. "Besides, rules were made to be broken. Come on." She headed down the hall, pausing only long enough to put a record on the stereo.

Joan Baez began, sounding husky and filled with secrets.

The bedroom was cluttered with books, papers, mail. There was a refreshing lack of frills. Sharon smiled faintly as she slipped off the sandals and started to undress. "Well? I said tomorrow was an early day."

"Right, you said that." He tried not to hurry as he took off his clothes and joined her in the large bed.

Joan was singing about passionate strangers.

They spent some time just getting to know one another. Her body was lean and healthy, the body of a person who enjoyed exercise. She definitely enjoyed sex.

It was a very nice couple of hours. Baez kept singing the same songs over and over until Blue felt as if the words were permanently seared into his soul. There was no big passion sweeping them away. Instead, what they had was a

lot of fun. He decided that they could come to like each other very much, even if they never again went to bed.

Although that would be nice, too.

Finally she sat up against the headboard. "You're a good lay," she announced.

He was a little startled, but then he smiled. "Thank you. I might say the same about you."

"We'll do it again sometime." She reached for his jeans and threw them at him. "But for right now, get the hell out of here. I have a seven o'clock date with some stiffs."

As he drove home, the sound of Joan Baez was still echoing in his head. He forgot the case and everything else, including his headache.

Chapter 24

Jody fell asleep in front of the television, but Tom was too keyed up to relax. He sat in a chair all night, staring out the window, working on two packs of cigarettes and a bottle of Old Grandad. He was thinking about Kowalski. The desire for revenge against the cop was a cold flame in his gut, but it was a fire without direction, like the ones burning in the hills. Kowalski had to pay, that much Tom knew, but the coin in which that payment should be made wasn't clear yet.

Sometime near dawn he finally dozed off.

When he woke a couple of hours later, his mind felt muddled and more weary than it had before the sleep. A shower helped some, and so did brushing his teeth to rid himself of the taste of too many cigarettes and too much booze.

They went back to the Original Pantry Cafe for breakfast, and again he ate a huge meal. Jody picked listlessly at a couple of eggs, maintaining a strained silence.

He seemed to have a problem and Tom couldn't figure out what it was. That worried him. Used to be, he could read Jody loud and clear. Now there seemed to be secret places where he wasn't welcome. It wasn't right.

When they got back to the motel, Tom fished the phone book out and looked up Kowalski's name. It was just that simple. He rubbed the listing with the tip of one finger.

The flame inside flared a little.

At last, he became aware that Jody was pacing the room like a restless cat. Tom watched him for a moment, then threw a crumpled cigarette pack at him. "What's up?"

"Nothing." But the single word didn't sound very convincing.

"Something's wrong. Why don't you just tell me?"

"I said, nothing's wrong," Jody snapped. He rubbed his forehead, as if it hurt. "I need a Coke. Want one?"

Tom shook his head.

"Okay." Jody picked up a handful of change from the dresser and left the room.

Tom frowned. Jody was lying to him; something was wrong. He got up and followed his brother from the room. He stood on the balcony outside and leaned far enough over the iron railing to see the soda machine below. Jody wasn't there. However, Tom could also see a phone booth and inside the booth, Jody.

Tom felt a tightening in his gut.

He walked lightly in his stockinged feet down the steps and across the small brick courtyard. Jody didn't even know he was there, until Tom reached out with one hand and depressed the lever to break the phone connection.

Jody spun around to face him. He compressed his lips tightly, then slowly replaced the receiver. "That was a stupid thing to do," he said.

"Who the hell were you talking to?"

Instead of answering, Jody pushed by him and walked to the soda machine. He dropped several coins in and took out a can of Coke. Still without speaking, he turned and went back upstairs.

Tom trailed behind.

Jody sat on his bed and opened the soda. Tom remained standing, looking down at him. "I asked you a question, Jody. Who were you talking to?"

"Don't play Big Daddy with me." Jody's voice held a coldness that Tom had never heard there before. "I'm not fucking ten years old."

"Who were you talking to? Please, Jody?" This time he spoke pleadingly.

"A friend of mine." Jody spit the words out.

"What friend?"

"Just a goddamned friend." He bent his head back and stared up at Tom. "For Chrissake, Tommy, do you think I don't know anybody? After ten years? I'm not a frigging monk. I wasn't locked up. I had a job and a home and some friends. Not many, but a few."

Tom looked at him, trying to figure out who this angry man was. What had happened to his brother? "Okay," he said finally. "I don't give a damn. But did you tell this good friend where you're at?"

"No. I didn't tell him anything, because the line was busy."

"Does he know about me?"

Jody shook his head. "I just told him I had some business." He took a quick gulp of Coke. "I had to tell him something, after four years. I couldn't just let him come home and find me gone. But he doesn't know anything about what's going on."

"Why did you call him?"

"Just to talk."

Tom wanted this conversation to end; he didn't like the ache in his chest. "Okay," he said. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

Jody finished the soda and crushed the can.

Tom crawled under the bed and found his shoes. "We need to get busy."

"You understand about the phone call?" Jody pressed.

"Yeah, sure, why not?"

Jody didn't seem satisfied, but he didn't say anymore.

The apartment building looked like a dump to Tom. He had thought that a fascist pig like Kowalski would have a better place to live.

They sat parked on the street in front of the building for a long time, watching the comings and goings on the block.

"Come on," Tom said finally, opening the car door. "Let's go take a closer look."

"What if he's there?"

"Are you kidding? At this time of the day? No way. The supercop is out chasing the bad guys. He likes doing that better than anything else he does."

"Maybe it's his day off."

"Shit, he probably never takes a day off. He's only alive when he's working. Kowalski is like that. Believe me, I know."

Tom knew.

He knew because once upon a time he and Kowalski spent forty-eight hours together in an interrogation room. They got real close. Even more than those hours, though, Tom could remember the look on the cop's face at the very moment they met.

Tom was hiding under the porch, listening to the roar of a sudden thunderstorm above. He was scared and crying. A car stopped nearby and he could hear the voices of men as they searched for him. They even had a dog.

But it was Kowalski who found him, who hit him with the glare of a powerful flashlight. Tom blinked, squinted through the brightness, and saw that face. The look was clear: the hunter victorious. It was a look he never forgot.

"Somebody else might be there. His wife or something." Jody's voice brought him back to the present.

"Then we won't go in," he said, exasperated. Jody should be showing a little more enthusiasm, he thought.

They stopped in the lobby to check the row of mailboxes. Jody spotted the right one; Kowalski lived in apartment 511. The hallway was empty as they climbed the stairs and found the right door.

Tom knocked a couple of times, but as he had expected, there wasn't any answer. He smirked triumphantly at Jody.

A cop, he thought and told Jody, should have an

efficient lock on his door. The one Kowalski had was hardly better than no lock at all. Within two minutes, they were inside.

Some unopened mail had been dropped on a small table just inside the door. Tom picked it up and looked through it quickly. It was boring, just bills and ads. No wonder Kowalski hadn't bothered to open it. He dropped it back onto the table.

The living room was small, made even smaller by the clutter of old newspapers and cast-off clothes. Tom shook his head. Years of institutional living had given him an almost compulsive sense of neatness. This place was a real mess. Maybe crime didn't pay, but neither, it seemed, did being a cop.

Jody picked up the framed photo of a kid and a woman who needed to lose some weight. "His family?"

"Must be." Tom looked at the back of the picture and read the date penciled there. "Shit, this was taken the same year I got sent away."

Jody wiped the frame with the edge of his shirt and replaced it on the shelf. He sat on the couch as Tom made a tour of the rest of the place. The refrigerator was almost empty. The bathroom was reasonably neat, but the small bedroom was another clutter of clothes, papers, and several used plates and glasses.

What a slob.

If Tom had still felt any fear of Kowalski, this apartment had ended it. Somebody who lived like this couldn't be any kind of a threat to a man with a mind like his.

He went back into the living room and joined his brother on the couch. He lit a cigarette.

Jody sighed. "So?" he said. "Are we just going to sit here and kill him when he comes in?" The voice held only mild curiosity.

"You in some kind of frigging hurry?" Tom asked. "What's the matter, can't wait to get back to your friend? Is that it?"

Jody lowered his head. "It's not like that."

"You can cut out anytime, you know? I can get along without your help."

"Don't say that, Tommy. Jesus Christ, I'm doing my best. I'm trying to be what you want. I'm trying to be a good brother."

"Yeah, well."

There was a brief silence.

Jody sighed again and shifted position. "I only wanted to know what was going to happen next. That's all. I was just wondering when we'd be able to start living a normal life again."

Tom didn't even know what a normal life was anymore. Didn't Jody understand that? Could the two of them really go off someplace and be happy like other people? Even after all that had happened?

Even after the boys?

But all that was too scary to think about right now. He shook his head. "No, we're not gonna kill him yet. That would be too easy. He has to suffer first. Just like he made us suffer."

"Maybe. I guess so. But what are we going to do?"

"I don't know yet. We'll work on it. But for now, let's get out of here before the bastard turns up." They started for the door.

Tom saw a fat Magic Marker lying on the table next to the mail. He smiled as an idea struck him and picked it up.

Jody, standing by the door, watched. "What're you doing?"

"Leaving a message for my friend, the pig. Just for old time's sake." He leaned close to the wall and printed the words in big purple letters.

When he was finished, he recapped the marker carefully and put it into his shirt pocket.

They went back to the car and sat there, waiting. Jody ran out once to the store on the corner for some beers and hero sandwiches.

It was hot.

Finally, late in the afternoon, a bright red and yellow Jeep squealed to a stop and a man jumped out.

It had been a long time, but Tom recognized Kowalski immediately. He was a little heavier, with a moustache that hadn't been there before and a bit less hair on top, but it was him, all right.

Tom didn't know what he had expected to feel at that moment, but it couldn't have been the deep cold that was filling him now. There was the man who had ruined his life, dragged him away from home and Jody, sent him to ten years of hell. Tom thought he should have wanted to rage. But all he could do was watch as Kowalski disappeared into the building.

"You okay?" Jody asked.

Tom realized that he was gripping the beer can with both hands, crushing it.

"Tommy?"

He shook his head to clear it. "I'm okay," he said. "I'm okay. But let's get out of here. Back to the motel."

Jody started the car.

"We have to hurt him," Tom said suddenly. "I don't even care so much about killing him. Just so long as we can make him hurt. Hurt bad."

He threw the squashed beer can out the window.

Chapter 25

It was a nice day for a funeral.

There is a myth in some circles that a murderer will sometimes show up at the burial of his victim. Because of that belief, cops will often attend such services. In Spaceman's experience, no one had ever once caught a killer that way. Myths, though, die hard.

Not many people turned out to see Peter Lowe laid to rest. A young black minister said the words and almost sounded as if he meant some of them. Listening were the representative of the cemetery, a reporter from the *Times* (young, brash, and new to the police beat, who was there hoping that the cops would put the drop on the killer right at the graveside, and she'd have an exclusive), Spaceman, and Blue.

That, at least, was the main group. Three others hung on the periphery. One was an old woman dressed all in black. Spaceman knew her. Her hobby was attending funerals and she cried very nicely.

Second was a young boy wearing dark shades that hid most of his face.

Finally, and hovering so far back that he might have been waiting for another service, was a fat man.

The old lady didn't interest Spaceman and Blue. The boy did. Most of all, the fat man caught their attention. Even myths had to have some truth to them, Spaceman thought.

The coffin and flowers must have cost a bundle; it certainly wasn't your hum-drum potter's field burial. Perhaps impressed by the cost of the thing, the minister put all he had into the service. He read a poem about children dying that Spaceman had never heard before.

As the brief service ended, Spaceman moved toward the boy, and Blue trailed the fat man, hoping to get his license number.

The boy was nervous. Or maybe he just didn't like funerals much. Spaceman offered him a cigarette, which he accepted with alacrity and smoked quickly; his movements seemed jerky, desperate. He was hurting bad.

"You knew Pete, did you?" Spaceman asked.

The boy nodded.

"Tell me about it. Starting with your name."

"Martin." That was all, not even any way of telling whether it was his first name or his last. Maybe it was neither. But Spaceman didn't press the subject; he knew that it probably didn't matter. "I just knew him, that's all. You know people, don't you?" Even his smartass tone had a listless quality to it.

"Yeah, I know people. Mostly I know other cops. You two in the same line of work, were you?"

Martin seemed to be looking at him, but there was no way of knowing for sure behind the glasses. "Hell, no. That's not my bag."

Spaceman wished he could see the boy's eyes, but it wasn't that important. Martin was trying to play it cool, but he was strung out. The kid would probably be buried himself within three months. "You have any idea who might have wanted Pete on ice?"

"Nope, nope." He jiggled nervously. "Hey, you know, man, I just felt bad about him buying it like that. I seen in the paper that he was getting stuck in the ground today, and I thought that maybe somebody who knew him should be here." The speech wore him out; he took a deep breath. "Pete was okay. He was okay, that's all."

"He was a user, right?"

A quick glance around. "Pills is all. Not the hard stuff. He didn't even smoke. Made him sick, he always said."

Spaceman saw Blue approaching. There wasn't anything

else to be learned from Martin. He did manage to squeeze the address of a downtown crashpad out of him, supposedly a place where he might be reached, should the necessity arise. Spaceman wouldn't have bet the rent money on that, but he let the boy go.

Martin started away, then paused long enough to watch the sod being replaced over the grave. He shook his head and walked away quickly. It would have been nice if the sight made him think a little bit about his own fragile mortality, but Spaceman knew it wouldn't. Pete was already a part of history, except that for Martin, like for so many others in this city, there was no such thing as a past. There was just the future. Martin would keep looking ahead, never back, and still he wouldn't see disaster coming. Until it was too late.

Blue reached the spot where Spaceman was standing. "Nothing?"

"*Nada.* Of course." Spaceman turned to look at him. "Believe it or not, Martin was just a good buddy. He thought Pete ought to have one standing by." He shrugged. "Sometimes even the creeps of this world will do something nice.

"Well, maybe our plump friend felt the same way. Maybe he just wanted to do something humane."

"You run the license?"

"The car is registered to a guy named Donelli. Managed to find out that he owns a drugstore in Westwood."

"A drugstore?"

Blue nodded as they turned and headed back toward the car.

"Martin just told me that young Peter's single vice was pills. He liked to take them."

"That's interesting."

"I think so."

It wasn't until they were in the car and headed for Westwood that Spaceman mentioned the message he'd found scrawled on the wall of his apartment the previous

day. " 'You'll be sorry,' it said. That's all, in big purple letters."

Blue frowned. "What was taken?"

"Not a damned thing. Except the purple pen." He shrugged. "Probably just kids."

"You think so?"

"Sure. What else?"

"Maybe you have a secret enemy out there somewhere."

Spaceman snorted. "I have a lot of enemies, but not many of them are subtle enough for this kind of thing. Most of them would just lay a two-by-four alongside my head if they wanted to make a point."

Blue hesitated before speaking again. "If I say something personal you won't take it wrong, will you?"

"I might. Say it anyway."

"You think maybe it could have been your son?"

"Robbie?" The possibility hadn't even occured to him.

"Well, I just thought he might be really pissed about something," Blue explained quickly. "That might explain why he ran away and this could be just more of the same."

Spaceman wondered if maybe he should blow up at a suggestion like that. But as he thought about it, and about what he'd learned the last few days, he was forced to consider the idea seriously. "I don't think Robbie would have done it," he said. "But who the hell knows? I never thought he'd steal or shack up with some rich bitch, either."

If Blue was surprised by the revelations, he didn't show it. "Well, it probably wouldn't hurt to keep your eyes open for the next few days. Just in case."

"Just in case. So I can fight off the flying two-by-fours, right?"

The drugstore had a sleek façade, fitting the image of the greenery-bedecked mall in which it was located. Not exactly the kind of place a street kid like Pete would be

expected to feed his pill habit. They spotted the car from the cemetery parked nearby.

As they sat there, a steady stream of customers moved in and out of the store. None of them looked like anything but straight Republican ticketers. "Well," Spaceman said finally, "shall we converse with Mr. Donelli?"

They got out of the car and walked into Donelli's. Spaceman loosened his tie as he moved. The chic store was stocked with trendy greeting cards, best-selling paperbacks, and all the other necessities of life in the fast lane.

Donelli himself was at the back, manning the pharmacy counter. He had shed the dark sport coat he'd worn to the funeral, wearing instead a lime green smock over his shirt and tie. They waited patiently until he finished filling a prescription for an old lady bent and twisted with age, and then Spaceman leaned across the counter. "We need to talk, Donelli," he said quietly.

The man looked up and saw them. A faint but visible shudder passed through his body. He had a beer gut that shook. "I'm busy," he said, trying to sound brusque, but coming off scared.

"Get unbusy. Or we can go downtown, if you'd rather."

He blanched. "Come into my office." He released the hidden catch on the gate and they passed through. "Dinah, take over out here, please."

A young woman in a matching smock appeared from somewhere and nodded. "Sure thing, Mr. D."

Donelli led them into his office, closed the door firmly, then turned to look at them. "It was really stupid of me."

"What was?" Spaceman asked.

"You know. Going to that damned funeral."

"Why did you?"

Donelli sat behind a cluttered desk. They could almost see his mind clicking behind the thick glasses he wore. "I went," he said finally, "because I knew the boy. That's no crime."

"Depends. How did you know him?"

"What do you mean, how?"

Spaceman sat in a chair facing Donelli. Blue remained standing by the door. "I mean this. Pete was a street hustler. He lived by having sex with men and getting paid for it. Nobody can work all the time, though, and Pete had a hobby. His hobby was swallowing pills. It just seems a little curious to me that somebody like him would number among his acquaintances a man like you. Successful businessman. Married, I'll bet, with a couple of kids."

Donelli nodded miserably. "Three," he said.

"There you go. Just like I figured, the perfect American family."

"Except for one thing," Blue put in. "The simple fact that it isn't enough for you. Maybe you need more. Maybe you need something only a kid like Pete can give."

The man's face was by now almost the same shade of green as his smock. "You have no right to say things like that. You have no proof of anything. I knew Pete, but it was nothing like that. We just knew each other. Go away, please, and leave me alone. Before I call my lawyer."

Spaceman nodded. "You're right. We can't prove a thing, so I guess you're off the hook. But humor me. How about if I just theorize a little?" When Donelli didn't respond, he glanced at Blue.

"I don't mind," Blue said cheerfully. "Theorize to your heart's content."

"Thank you. The way I see it is, Donelli here likes to have his kicks with boys. Young boys. Now, I'm not in the business of passing moral judgment, no matter how sick and disgusting anyone might be. Different strokes, you know?"

"That's a nice liberal attitude," Blue said.

"Thanks again. Anyway, Pete liked pills, all the pretty little bits of color that made him feel good...and maybe made what he did with creeps like Donelli here a little more

bearable. So I figure they had what is known as a reciprocal relationship. Sex for pills. Or pills for sex, depending on how you look at it."

Donelli was staring at the top of his desk. "You can't prove anything," he repeated dully.

"True. But we can make your life very unhappy from now on, and I think we will."

Donelli made a gagging sound which was followed by a silence that lasted for minutes. Then he sighed deeply. "Pete was supposed to meet me downtown," he said in a whisper. They had to strain to hear him. "The night he died, we were supposed to get together at the bus station. He called that afternoon to set it up."

"Where was he calling from?"

"At the beach someplace, that's all I know."

"How was he going to get downtown to meet you?"

"I suppose the same way he got everywhere. Hitch. But he never showed up. I waited over an hour, but he never came." Donelli was starting to cry, but Spaceman figured the tears were for himself, not for Peter Lowe. "I shouldn't have gone today. It was stupid. But Pete was a nice boy."

They didn't answer, and in a few more minutes, they were ready to go. There was nothing they could do to Donelli, except warn him to shape up, but Spaceman felt a grim satisfaction as they departed. The fat pig would think twice the next time he paid some kid to get on his knees in front of him.

They spent several hours cruising the streets that night, talking to the kids and the crazies, bluffing a little, making some threats and spreading some petty cash. It all added up to nothing.

Spaceman also flashed Robbie's picture around, but that netted him no more than did their questions about the murdered boys.

It was after midnight by the time they gave up and

parted company. Spaceman didn't feel like facing his apartment alone, so he went to Mandy's. She was having a party and most of the guests still lingered, working on the last of the wine and the joints. They all knew Spaceman and knew he was a cop. He went first into the bedroom to shed his jacket and hide the gun. It bugged Mandy when he did that; she said it was like accusing her friends of being criminals or something. He never bothered to debate the issue with her.

Turned for the moment at least into a civilian, he joined the circle sitting on the living room floor. Someone handed him a Dixie cup filled with cheap red wine and someone else passed the joint. He drank first, then inhaled noisily. In only a few minutes he had started to relax.

They were heatedly arguing the merits of some French movie that he hadn't seen and didn't want to see, so he felt no obligation even to listen. Instead, he stretched out on the rug to let the pot, the wine, and Mandy's massaging hands do their job. He could almost forget the case and Robbie.

Which was why he kept coming back.

That and the sex.

One of the jerks kept giving him dirty looks. Maybe he had figured on scoring with Mandy tonight. Too bad, Spaceman thought airily as Mandy ushered everyone else out, including the disappointed Romeo. Too bad.

When they were alone, Mandy led him by the hand to the waterbed. He was too whacked to do much more than just lie there and enjoy the touch of her hands and mouth roaming over his body. He concentrated on the stars overhead.

Stars. Like the ones on Hollywood Boulevard. Like the galaxies Pete probably saw when he swallowed the pills. Better make-believe constellations than the reality of Donelli.

Stars. Poor Chris, who probably would have sold his

soul to have his name on the Boulevard, and who died in futile pursuit of that dumb dream.

It was all too much for Spaceman and he stopped thinking about it, concentrating instead on what Mandy's mouth was doing. It got better and better; he built and built until everything came together perfectly.

The universe exploded in his head.

Blue was having a hard time getting to sleep, so he sat in the dark, drinking. He knew the reason: This was the anniversary of his father's death. Some things hung on a lot longer than they should have. It wasn't exactly an act of mourning that kept him awake. Not the mourning of his old man's death anyway. Maybe it was just the sense of loss and failure that had been their relationship.

Like the hunting trip when he was twelve.

Hank Maguire was a man of action and he loved hunting. Probably it was that very lust for action that made him the success he was in business. He wanted his son to take after him in that. So when he ordered, Blue took the rifle and donned the clothes, and into the woods they went.

But when push came to shove, when Blue had the deer within his sights, he couldn't pull the trigger.

"You lack the killer instinct," his father said in a cold and distant voice. "No man can be a success in this world without the goddamned killer instinct." Then he killed the deer himself.

He had the right instincts.

Blue poured another shot and smiled into the darkness. Too bad the old man hadn't been able to see him in Nam. It would have made him proud the way his boy learned to kill.

Unfortunately, by the time Blue got out of the POW camp and home, Hank Maguire was dead, so Blue never knew what his father thought about it all.

Blue was disgusted with himself. All this maudlin thought was pointless. He needed to go to bed and get some sleep, so that tomorrow he could be sharp. They had to find out who was killing kids.

He dumped the rest of the drink down the drain, rinsed the glass carefully and went to bed.

Spaceman woke up sometime in the blackest part of the night. He went to the john, then hunted for his cigarettes, in his jacket pocket. Instead of the cigarettes, he pulled out the creased memo from Lompoc. Why the hell was he still carrying that around?

He crumpled the paper to throw it away.

Then, instead, he shoved it back into his pocket. Forgetting the cigarette, he went back to bed.

Chapter 26

JODY didn't like what they were doing.

"It's too fuckin' dangerous," he complained for the hundredth time that day. They were sitting in the newly acquired car, parked outside a drug rehab center on Spring Street. Kowalski and a man who was probably his partner were inside.

"We have to take a few chances," Tom said. "Or else we'll never get anywhere. Risks are necessary."

"I don't even know what the hell we're supposed to be doing besides following Kowalski all over the damned city." He was slumped against the car door, the *Times* in his lap.

"I know."

"Do you really, Tommy? For sure? Have you actually thought this thing through?"

Tom smiled. "Sure. I've had ten years to think it through. After all, I didn't have a job and a lot of friends to keep me busy. There was just me and my thoughts."

Jody sighed, but didn't say anything. His head was pounding again, and he realized that the headache had been there since the night Tom got out of the hospital.

That seemed like a disloyal thought, and he squelched it immediately.

Jody knew for damned sure that he, himself, hadn't thought any of this through. In the beginning, all he wanted was to have Tom out of that place. He'd done enough time. But now Jody was finding out that there was a lot of difference between visiting his brother for an hour or so every few months, and being around him all the time.

He used to think that having his brother with him would make life better.

Better.

Shit, what a joke that was. Nothing was working out the way he'd planned. Now he had a headache all the time, he was scared, and he was a killer.

He shoved that thought away, too.

Life before had been good. After all the rough years, things had finally fallen into place. He liked working in the bookstore. He liked the little house that was almost in the country. And he especially liked living with Jerry.

Jerry. What must he be thinking? Was he hurt by the way things had happened? Jody hoped not. Maybe someday he could explain it all to him. Maybe someday he could go back to the funny little house and his life there.

But for right now, he was stuck. He owed Tommy.

Jody sighed and lifted the paper again.

Tom kept his eyes on the door of the shabby building. He didn't want to take a chance of missing his prey. Not much chance of that happening, of course, with them riding around in that fancy car.

He knew that Jody was getting restless and he heard the sigh. It bothered him, made him think that maybe Jody was slipping away. He reached out to rub his brother's arm. "Hey, it's gonna be okay."

"Yeah, if you say so, Tommy."

"I say so." He glanced down at the newspaper and Kowalski's name seemed to jump off the page at him. "What's that about?"

Jody read quickly. "It's about Pete and Chris," he said softly. "About what happened to them in the park."

"No shit? It's in the paper?"

"Yeah. A small story."

"Kowalski's on the case?"

"Seems to be. He had no comment, but a spokesman

said they have a number of strong leads and an arrest is imminent."

Tom laughed. "Hell, he doesn't have nothing. That's just bullshit for the press." He shook his head, still chuckling. "You know, it's pretty ironic. That's what it is, ironic. Him being the one on this thing."

Jody didn't laugh. "He caught you once before. What makes you so sure it can't happen again?"

Tom straightened. "I was just a kid then. What did I know? He won't be so lucky this time." An idea started to take form, ever so slowly, in Tom's mind. "Besides," he said thoughtfully, "maybe he won't have the chance to catch me this time. Maybe we'll catch him first."

"What the hell does that mean?"

He wasn't sure yet; it was all still too vague, but he was starting to get a little excited anyway. "Maybe we'll snatch him."

"Terrific." Jody sounded sarcastic. "And then do what?"

Tom smiled again. "Whatever we want."

It got boring following the two cops in their fancy car, so when they stopped for lunch at a place on Melrose, Tom told Jody just to keep driving. There was no risk. He knew, now, that he could reach out and put the drop on Kowalski whenever he wanted. They drove to a Pizza Hut and shared a large pepperoni and a pitcher of beer.

When the pizza was gone and they were working on the last of the beer, Jody leaned closer and spoke in a low voice. "Were you serious about what you said before?"

"About what?"

"Snatching the cop."

Tom glanced around, but the lunch rush was over and no one was sitting near them. "I think so. I think I was real serious."

"Kidnapping is a bad rap, you know."

He just looked at Jody, who finally realized the

absurdity of what he'd said, and shrugged. "Anyway," Tom went on, "I'm crazy, right? They've been saying for years that I'm off the wall. So I'm not responsible."

"What about me?"

"Maybe you're crazy, too."

Jody blinked, but didn't say anything.

Tom emptied the last of the beer from the pitcher into his mug. "The thing is, something like this takes planning." His mind was racing too fast, and he lighted a cigarette to help calm himself down a little. "First of all, we need to find a place. Someplace private, where nobody would think to look. That'll be our headquarters."

"What kind of place?"

"Hell, I don't know. Use your imagination, why don't you? I can't do all the thinking."

They left the restaurant and got back into the car. Jody inserted the key (this driver had been more considerate than most) and then he just sat there.

"What's wrong?" Tom asked.

"I know a place," he said. "But maybe it's not right."

"What place?"

Jody shook his head. "I'd rather show you."

"Okay. Show me."

They headed east out of the city, and then north. Tom was curious about where they were going, but he didn't ask. Jody's face was closed and secretive; it was clear that he was on some dangerous edge, and the last thing Tom needed or wanted was for Jody to fall.

They finally left the freeway, turning onto a narrower highway and then sometime later onto a dirt road. "How'd you ever find a place way out here anyway?"

"Came out here once," was all Jody said. "Before it closed down."

At last, a sign appeared. Weathered and in danger of falling, it was still readable. HOLLY POINT AMUSEMENT PARK.

Jody stopped the car and stared at the sign. "It was a nice place," he said. "But the people running it went broke. They couldn't compete."

Tom wondered when Jody had come out here, and with whom, but again he decided not to ask. Instead, he just opened the car door. "Let's check it out. See if we can get in."

That proved to be no problem. A few strikes with a rock and the padlock snapped open.

Once inside, it was easy to see why the park hadn't been able to survive in a *Star Wars* world. Holly Point was an old-fashioned place, with a merry-go-round, ferris wheel, and a few other rides, as well as several buildings.

There was a sense of sadness about the place, but Tom liked it.

He walked around for almost an hour, sizing things up, his mind filled with possibilities. The whole plan seemed to fall into order now.

"This is perfect, Jody," he said, meaning it. He gave his brother a tight hug.

Jody didn't say anything, but he returned the hug.

Jody stopped to take a deep breath before going through the door. The name of the bar was the Sweatshop. It was Tom's idea to come here and meet somebody to party with, instead of just picking a boy up on the street.

His reasoning was clear, at least to him. By changing the way they worked, they could confuse the cops. Shake old Kowalski up a little. Also, nobody much cared about street kids, so the case was only worth a small story in the *Times*. By picking somebody more important, they could up the stakes.

Jody thought it sounded pretty stupid, but he didn't have the strength to argue, so here he was. It had been a long time since he'd hit the bar scene, not since meeting Jerry, and Jody wasn't sure he could still hack it.

Music assaulted his ears as he entered. The place was crowded with customers, mostly young college and professional types. Jody, in his good slacks and a clean shirt, fit right in. He made his way to the bar and ordered a beer. It wasn't long before somebody slid onto the neighboring stool.

"Hi," a voice said.

"Hi," Jody said, glancing sideways. The guy looked about his own age, and he wasn't a hustler. Or at least he wasn't cheap. His clothes were expensive and there was gold around his neck, on both wrists, and on several fingers.

"I'm Steve," he said.

"Jody."

They talked for about twenty minutes, the kind of bar chatter that passed for sociability in this world. Steve, it turned out, was a music student at UCLA. Classical stuff mostly; he was working on a symphony of his own now. He wasn't into the bar scene—he laughed when he said that, adding, "Who is? But here we all are anyway, right?"

Right, Jody thought. All of us here and wondering why.

Steve lived in Santa Monica with someone named J.P. They had this really great relationship. But J.P. was a lot older and liked a quiet kind of life. Luckily, he was also very understanding and didn't mind if Steve went out alone.

Jody didn't say much beyond what was necessary to keep Steve talking. At last, weary of it all, he spoke up. "My car is right outside," he said. "How about going out there for a few minutes?"

He'd decided that a fast trip outside was all that Steve would agree to. Anything else might smack too much of emotional involvement, and he was true, in his way, to the missing and tolerant J.P.

After the obligatory hesitation, Steve agreed, and he even picked up Jody's tab.

Only Jody saw Tom duck out of sight as they approached the car. When he opened the door, an arm emerged and the knife was at Steve's throat before he could react. He lost most of his tan.

"What the hell is going on?" he managed to say. There was a croak in the words.

Tom smiled. "A party is going on. You're the guest of honor." He pulled until Steve was inside the car and they were sitting side by side in the back seat.

Jody got behind the wheel. "His name is Steve," he said flatly.

"Nice name. You like good times, Steve?" Tom held the knife so that its point pressed lightly at Steve's throat.

"You want money? There's almost two hundred dollars in my wallet. Take it. Take the chains. The watch."

Tom shook his head. "That makes me feel bad, Steve. You must think we're just a couple of punks. Is that what you think?"

Steve didn't say anything.

Tom studied him and then frowned. "He's a little old."

"Shit, Tommy, you're the one who sent me into the bar. There weren't any kids in there."

"Okay, okay. He'll do."

"Don't hurt me," Steve whispered. "Please. Please."

"We only want to have a good time. Play along with us and nothing will happen to you."

His lips moved silently; maybe he was praying.

"Let's go to the beach," Tom said. He knew they couldn't risk the park again. Besides, he liked the beach. A good place for a party.

They killed him, of course. Once he was dead, Tom decided that not to take the money would be really dumb. He might have taken the jewelry, too, but Jody got stubborn about that.

They left the body in the shadows of an old hot dog stand.

Instead of going straight back to the motel, Tom ordered Jody to detour to Vermont Avenue. It was very late and all the lights were off in Kowalski's apartment. Tom hunted through the glove compartment until he found an old envelope. Then he took out the purple pen. He kept the note brief and to the point.

Jody took it inside and slipped it under Kowalski's door.

Driving back to the motel, Jody seemed disgusted. "You like this, don't you?" he said. "It's all just a big game to you, and you're having fun."

"Maybe," Tom said. His eyes were closed. "But maybe I figure it's my turn."

Chapter 27

SPACEMAN found the note just before dawn.

He didn't usually get up that early, of course. But as he was finding out lately, the old bladder didn't operate with quite the same efficiency as it had in earlier years. A beer too many before bed and he paid the price.

Standing in the bathroom, he decided he was thirsty. It was as he detoured to the kitchen for a glass of orange juice that he saw the paper.

It didn't register at first. His mind, the small part of it that was awake, was on the cold juice. If not for the fact that he'd impulsively straightened the living room before calling it a night, the paper could have escaped his attention completely. But because the floor was relatively clean, the square of gleaming whiteness caught his eye in the pale morning light.

He walked over and picked it up.

At first, all that struck him was the purple ink, and he felt a nervous tightening in his stomach. If Blue's theory was right, this might be another message from Robbie.

But then he read the note and he knew differently. The tight feeling became a dull ache. There wasn't much on the paper. A crudely drawn map, an arrow pointing, and a few words: "Dear Kowalski, this ones for you. See you soon and then you'll be SORRY."

It wasn't signed.

Spaceman found an envelope in a drawer and carefully slid the message into it. He knew what would be waiting for him at the spot marked by X on the map. Another body.

He called Blue and once he was sure the other man was awake, told him about the note. He was quiet for a moment after hearing the news. "What the hell is going on here?" he said finally.

"Do I fucking know?" Spaceman said.

"Could be a hoax. Maybe somebody just saw your name in the paper. There are all kinds of crazies out there." Blue paused. "And if it is a hoax, Robbie could still be behind it."

Spaceman shrugged silent and unseen agreement. None of what Blue was saying eased the pain in his gut. "Pick me up," he said.

"We're going out there on our own?"

"Yeah, we are. I am anyway."

Blue sighed over the line. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Thanks."

"Hell," he said lightly. "What's a partner for?"

Spaceman was waiting on the sidewalk when the Porsche pulled up a short time later. He got in without a word, and Blue kept quiet, too. The only noise was the soft chatter of the police radio. It was a slow morning in Los Angeles.

"Heard they finally got those fires under control," Blue said at last. When there wasn't any response, he said, "Maybe it's an omen. Maybe it means that the weather is going to break, and we're going to bust these creeps."

"Maybe."

Blue gave up.

There was no more conversation, not even when they had reached their destination, and were standing poised on the top of a steep bank, looking down upon a ramshackle hot dog stand. Finally, they went down toward the shack, Spaceman in the lead, making his way clumsily through the sand in slick-soled loafers. Blue moved more easily in his Pumas.

They saw the body at the same moment; no real attempt

had been made to hide it. The bloody form of a young man was sprawled in the shadow of the building. The other killings had been bad enough, but what had been done to this human being made the taste of bile rise in Spaceman's throat. He turned away and swallowed hard.

Blue wavered a little.

"Damn," Spaceman said. "Damndamndamn."

Gaining control of himself, Blue bent down and poked carefully through the pile of clothes. He came up with a wallet and flipped it open. "Steven Lawrence," he said, glancing quickly at the face of the dead man and comparing it to the image on the driver's license. "A shitload of credit cards. No money. That's the first time they took the money."

"It's the first time there was any money. Pete had a dollar and Chris just a couple of bucks. This guy probably had a bundle. Check out the shiny stuff he's wearing. Wonder why they left that."

Blue was still flipping through the wallet. "He's a student at UCLA. Member of the auto club and some private health spa. A real solid citizen. Not like Pete and Chris."

Spaceman nodded glumly. "That might be what got him killed."

Blue handed him the wallet and started back toward the car to radio in.

Spaceman was mad. The case, bad enough to begin with, had taken an even nastier turn. He felt, stupidly, responsible. And he didn't like the feeling that maybe all these people were dead because of him.

It was several hours later before they were able to get away from the beach and into the office. McGannon was waiting. He sat behind the desk and surveyed them sourly. "So?"

Spaceman sat; again, Blue remained standing by the door. "So what?" Spaceman said.

"The stiffs seem to be piling up."

"They do."

"And I hear the killers are sending you mash notes." McGannon held up a Xerox of the note; the original was already in the lab. "Interesting."

"Maybe you think so."

"And what do you think?"

Spaceman shrugged.

"That's a great answer."

"What the hell do you want me to say?"

"How about that you've got the crazies that are doing this?"

Blue stepped forward. "Maybe the perps are somebody he busted before."

"Maybe," McGannon agreed.

"I guess somebody should start going through his files."

"Somebody already is. It doesn't take a damned college degree to figure that out."

Blue accepted that with a nod and stepped back to his place by the door.

McGannon put both hands behind his head and stretched. "So what are you plans for the rest of this glorious summer day?"

"To backtrack Lawrence."

"Do you think that will gain you any more than tracking down the first two did?"

"Maybe not," Spaceman said, "but do you have a better idea?"

McGannon smiled. "That's the pleasure of command. I don't have to have a better idea. I just get to tell you when your ideas suck. But I won't do that right now." He relaxed. "Come up with something pretty soon, will you? I've already had calls from a couple of the angrier gay groups in town. They're wondering if this case is being pursued with full enthusiasm."

"Screw them. I like their sudden social concern. Why

didn't they do something for Peter and Chris before it was too late?"

McGannon shrugged. "I didn't ask."

"Ask next time."

They stopped at the diner for some breakfast before setting out in quest of Steven Lawrence. Joe was behind the counter, of course, and he already knew about the latest killing. He offered up some encouraging words with the under-cooked eggs and over-done sausage, but they didn't feel much encouraged.

The standard *To Be Notified In Case of Accident* in Lawrence's wallet was a Joseph P. Kilbane, and the address was in a posh part of Santa Monica.

They went to the top floor of the very first-class apartment building. Their feet sank into the thick carpeting as Spaceman rang the muted bell.

The door was opened quickly. Spaceman figured that money could deal best with money, so he let Blue take it. There was no doubt that the man facing them was loaded. His clothes were the kind of casual designer things that cost plenty. And Blue, even unshaven and dressed in jeans, seemed to have class. They could relate to each other, probably.

Blue had his shield case in hand. "Mr. Kilbane? We're Detectives Kowalski and Maguire. May we talk with you, please?"

There was no hint of emotion on the finely-chiseled features as Kilbane's eyes swept over the ID and then raised to study Blue's face. "Is it very bad?" The voice sounded like New England.

Blue hesitated. "If we could step in?"

"Yes, of course."

He turned and led the way into a vast living room, furnished with antiques. Everything gleamed. The low table in front of the sofa held a silver tray with a coffee pot

and one china cup. Kilbane sat down. "Coffee?" he said automatically.

Blue shook his head. "Mr. Kilbane, you are acquainted with Steven Lawrence? He lives here?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid we have some bad news for you."

"I knew something had happened when he didn't come home. Is he dead?"

"Yes. Murdered."

The man took a careful sip of the steaming coffee. "Steven never stayed out all night. I hoped that perhaps it was merely an accident of some kind. I hoped. . ." He shut up and shook his head.

"Did he have any family that should be notified?"

"Not as far as I know. He never mentioned any family." Kilbane stood again and walked across the room to a picture window that looked out over the Pacific. "We lived together almost three years, but I don't know anything about his background."

"Yet you took him in?" Blue glanced around at the artwork decorating the room.

"We got along well. He was a very talented musician, with an astounding future. What a waste." He might have been discussing a stranger.

"We have reason to believe that Steven was killed by the same people who murdered two young boys this week."

Kilbane glanced at him. "The boys in the park, you mean?"

Blue nodded.

"But how can that be? As I understand it, they were both hustlers."

"They were. What about Lawrence?"

"That's absurd." He spoke firmly, yet without heat. It didn't seem possible that anything could stir him to emotion. "Steven was a music student. He did not go with men for money." Now it was Kilbane's turn to look at the

room and consider all that it signified. "He didn't need money."

"What was he doing when you met him?"

Kilbane sighed. "I suppose this is necessary."

"We want to catch the killers."

"Yes. The lust for revenge must be satisfied. It won't bring Steve back, of course."

"No," Blue said. "But it might keep others from dying."

Kilbane nodded. "When I met him, he was a music student. The only difference was that then he was a poor student. After we met, he was a very well-off student. He was not, then or now, a cheap hustler."

Spaceman, who was standing somewhat awkwardly in the middle of the room, afraid he might break something, cleared his throat. "Do you know how he might have met the killers?"

There was the briefest silence. "Sometimes he went into the bars. He was young."

"You didn't mind?"

A smile. "Of course I minded. But that was my own private problem."

"Do you have any idea where he might have gone last night?"

"None. We never discussed it."

They asked a few more questions, hoping to fill in some gaps, but nothing new was revealed by Kilbane's answers. As they were leaving, he walked them to the door. "Will there be any problem about the arrangements? I can claim the body?"

"Shouldn't be a problem," Blue said. "Unless some next-of-kin shows up."

"That is unlikely, I think."

They promised to let him know when the body could be claimed and he closed the door.

"Cold fish," Spaceman said.

Blue shrugged.

From behind the closed door there was a sudden crash and the sound of china breaking.

"Hell," Blue said.

There was a message from Karen on his desk when they got back to the office. He ignored it. The problem of Robbie was eating away at him, but there was just no time now to think about it. There was also a message from Sharon Engels. Her best guess (guess?) was that Lawrence had not been a willing participant in the sex acts that preceded his death. He was apparently raped, her note said. Repeatedly, including with one or more foreign objects, including a bottle.

So.

There was a pile of other papers in his basket and while waiting for Blue to return from the lab, Spaceman plowed through the accumulation. There was still no picture of the dead boy in Lompoc. He frowned. Probably he should still call up there and check that out, even if he felt sure Robbie was just screwing around with Becky Whatsherface.

One paper marked urgent caught his eye. It was several days old. Typical. He reached for a cigarette and started to read.

As the words penetrated his brain, he forgot the cigarette and about calling Lompoc. He kicked the metal wastebasket that sat beside his desk, sending it flying across the room. It crashed against the water cooler. Petrie, who was standing there drinking from a paper cup, jumped two feet into the air. Water spilled down the front of his shirt and pants. "Shit!" he yelled.

Spaceman was on his feet now. "Goddamn son of bitching motherfuckers! Why the hell doesn't anybody ever tell me anything in this fucking place?"

"Maybe," Petrie suggested, wiping at his clothes with a handkerchief, "because you're never in this fucking place."

"Hell."

Spaceman started for McGannon's office. Halfway there, he ran into Blue, literally. Without a word, he grabbed the slender man by one arm and dragged him along.

McGannon looked up, startled, as they burst through the door. "What?"

"You won't believe what I just found on my desk," Spaceman said, releasing his grip on Blue and waving the paper in McGannon's face.

"I suppose you're going to tell me."

Blue watched curiously.

"This is an APB from the Highway Patrol. They thought I might like to know that Thomas Hitchcock escaped last week from that hospital up north."

McGannon appeared to run his mind back over the years. Then he swore softly. "The knife, right?"

"For starters. And a lot of other things."

"Yeah, that was a strange one." McGannon obviously didn't like thinking about the Hitchcock case.

"Kinky is what it was," Spaceman said.

"Somebody want to tell me what the hell is going on?" Blue said.

Spaceman lowered himself into a chair. "Tom Hitchcock. I busted him about ten years ago. The court decided he was looney tunes and sent him up for treatment." He glanced at McGannon. "I don't think it worked."

"Apparently not."

"What'd he do?"

Spaceman grimaced. "Killed his parents. He used a butcher knife on both of them. Bloodiest damned thing I ever saw. At least, until this morning."

"You said kinky?"

"Yeah. The best story we could ever get down was that this Hitchcock and his brother were involved in some closer-than-usual sibling activities."

"Incest?"

The very word caused McGannon to sigh; he flicked away some invisible dust on the top of his desk.

"Right," Spaceman went on. "The parents found out and blamed him. The brother was just a kid, like twelve or so. I guess the shit really hit the old fan. They were going to have Tom sent away, arrested or something. He flipped out and filleted them both."

"Jesus. And now he's killing boys."

"Like I said, kinks upon kinks." He waved the paper in the air like a banner. "According to this, Tom used a knife on an aide up north and more or less walked out."

"Well, that would explain the personal angle," Blue said.

Spaceman nodded.

"Whatever happened to the brother?"

"Don't know. What the hell was his name anyway?" He closed his eyes and thought back. "Jody. Jody Hitchcock."

"Tom has a sidekick, right? Two killers. You think it's possible?"

"I think we better see whatever happened to Jody."

"Good idea," McGannon said. "And fast."

Spaceman crumpled the paper and walked out of the office.

Blue followed him.

Chapter 28

It proved surprisingly easy to follow the trail left by Jody Hitchcock over the past ten years. Spaceman remembered him only vaguely, as a skinny little kid with huge dark eyes. The first time he saw Jody was on the night of the murders. He was sitting on the couch, wearing only the bottom half of some thin summer pajamas, when Spaceman came into the room. He was curled into a tight ball, pale but quiet. No tears or hysterics, as might have been expected.

Spaceman, thinking of his own son, knelt beside the couch. "Hey, Jody," he said.

The eyes struggled to focus on him.

"You okay, are you?"

Jody nodded.

"Everything's going to be all right now. You don't have to be scared." A stupid thing to say. How could a child have seen the hacked-up bodies of his parents and not be terrified?

But Jody didn't look terrified. More bewildered. "Don't hurt him," he said in a whisper.

Spaceman leaned closer. "What?"

"Don't hurt Tommy, please. He's my brother."

Spaceman's mouth went dry. "You mean your brother did that?"

Jody nodded. Then a stricken look appeared in his eyes and the first tears began to roll down his face. "I didn't mean to snitch. Forget what I said. It wasn't true." The childish voice was edged with a very grown-up sense of desperation. "It wasn't Tommy," he said. "It was. . .it was a big Chinaman. That's who did it. A big Chinaman with a knife."

Spaceman glanced up at another cop. "Put out an APB on the older son."

Jody grabbed at his sleeve. "Don't hurt him."

Spaceman patted the seemingly fragile hand. "We won't, Jody."

"I shouldn't have told. It's my fault."

Later that night somebody drove the boy over to juvenile hall, and it was there that the paper trail began, a trail that ten years later they could still follow.

Jody was never adopted or even farmed out to a foster family; there were no relatives willing to take him. He stayed in the county home until age seventeen, when he graduated high school. He was an average student, a loner. Once he left the care of the county, his path became a little harder to follow, but with the help of social security it was possible. They found that he'd held a string of jobs, moving around the area restlessly for nearly a year. Then he started working in a small bookstore out in Azusa. He was now a partner in the store, and also in the ownership of a house nearby. Theoretically, he should still be happily in residence there.

Spaceman wouldn't have put much money on that likelihood, however.

It was an odd little house that made Spaceman think, for some reason, of a saltine cracker box. The white paint and blue trim gleamed in the bright sunshine, and flowers covered most of the small front yard.

"I'm in the back," a voice called in answer to the doorbell's chime. "Come on around. Unless you're selling something."

They followed the sound of the voice around the house.

A young man, thirty or so, was pulling weeds from a vegetable patch. He was thin almost to the point of gauntness, starting to turn red from the sun beating down on him, with sandy hair and horn-rimmed glasses. As they

approached, he leaned back onto his heels and shaded his eyes with one hand.

"Excuse us," Blue said. "We're trying to locate Jody Hitchcock."

"The whole world is," he replied shortly. Then he grinned sheepishly and wiped at the sweat rolling down his face. "Weeding is damned hard work, isn't it? I don't usually go in for this kind of thing."

"Somebody does. It's a terrific garden," Blue said.

He stood, wiping both hands on his denim shorts. "Yeah, well."

"Jody usually takes care of that, does he?"

"Uh-huh. Who are you anyway? Why are you looking for Jody?"

They introduced themselves. His name was Jerry Potter, and he didn't know where Jody was, either.

"I can't understand it," he said a few minutes later. They were in the house, sitting at the kitchen table, drinking the lemonade he'd offered. It was too sweet.

"So what happened between you and Jody before he left?" Spaceman asked, trying to swallow the sticky drink.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing." Potter used a paper napkin on his face; he was going to have a hell of a burn. "We have the bookstore and this place. I mean, it's nothing fancy, but it's enough. Things were just fine." He was quiet for a moment, frowning thoughtfully, rubbing the damp napkin back and forth on the table. "I've been thinking, though. I guess it was about three months ago that Jody started to get uptight. Not about us; things were fine there. It was like an attack of nerves. He..." Potter paused again, seeming to search for the right words. "It was like he was always looking over his shoulder. As if he were afraid of being surprised by something."

"Or someone," Blue said.

"Yeah. Then one day he just announced that he had some 'business' to take care of. I wasn't to worry and he'd

be back as soon as possible." Potter shrugged, but the darkness in his hazel eyes belied the casual tone of his words. "Then he climbed into his truck and took off."

They exchanged a look; it was thought that Tom Hitchcock had made his getaway in a truck.

"Does Jody have a violent streak?" Spaceman asked. Sitting in this sun-dappled, red-and-white kitchen, it sounded like a ridiculous question.

Potter seemed to think so, too. "Jody? Of course not. He's a quiet guy. A little moody, maybe, but good-natured. Gentle."

"What do you know about his past?"

"Not much. I know he spent a lot of time in an orphanage. His parents died when he was about twelve, I think."

"You know how?"

Potter shook his head. "I know it was traumatic for him."

Blue was quiet, studying the pattern of the tablecloth.

"Did Jody ever mention his brother?"

"Tom? Yes, but only once, just to say that he existed. I always sort of thought that maybe he was in jail or something. But I never pressed Jody about it. It wasn't important to me."

Spaceman lit a cigarette and looked for an ashtray.

Potter got a saucer from the cupboard and gave it to him. "There were letters, I know. But we just didn't talk about the past."

Spaceman scooted the saucer closer. "Jerry, Tom Hitchcock broke out of a hospital for the criminally insane last week."

Beneath the sunburn, his face went ashen. "My god, you're kidding."

"And we think Jody helped him escape. Is still helping him."

Potter took a quick gulp of lemonade. "That's very serious, isn't it? I mean, Jody could get into trouble?"

"Yes. A lot of trouble."

"But it was for his brother. Jody's very loyal."

"When Tom Hitchcock was seventeen, he murdered their parents," Spaceman said bluntly.

Potter was speechless now. He just shook his head helplessly.

Blue leaned forward. "Jerry, it gets worse."

He set the glass down very carefully. "Tell me." He sounded like a man clinging to a sinking raft.

Instead of answering directly, Blue pulled a newspaper from his pocket and flopped it open on the table. The faces of Chris and Pete looked up at them.

Potter seemed mesmerized. He ran a fingertip over the images. "You think Jody and his brother did these terrible things?"

Blue nodded.

"Oh God." He took a deep shuddering breath, then met Blue's gaze. "It's Tom's fault, you know. Jody wouldn't do anything like that on his own. His brother must be forcing him."

"Maybe. But we won't know that until we find them."

Potter must have had a store of personal strength. His jaw firmed. "Jody will need me. Will you call me when you find them?"

"You're pretty loyal, too."

"Jody is family. We have a good thing going here and I won't give up on it without a fight."

All three stood. "If you hear from him," Spaceman said, "let us know immediately. That's his best chance."

"I know. I'll call."

They left him standing in the kitchen.

Spaceman kicked a tree.

"Feel better?" Blue asked mildly.

"No, damnit, I don't feel better. I think I broke my fucking toe."

"Occupational hazard."

Spaceman leaned against the car. "I just wish I didn't feel like this is all my fault."

"Your fault? How do you figure that?"

"Maybe all these people are dying so that Thomas Hitchcock can get back at me."

"You know that's a load of shit, don't you?"

Spaceman didn't say anything.

Blue sighed. "I think we're going to beat this case, Spaceman."

"You do, huh?"

"Sure. Frankly, I think we make a pretty good team."

Spaceman looked at him for a moment. "Maybe," he admitted grudgingly. "But I keep getting the feeling that I'm playing Jack Klugman to your Tony Randall."

After a moment, Blue grinned. He lightly punched Spaceman on the arm. "Well, come on, then, Oscar. Let's go catch a crazy."

Spaceman limped around to the other side of the car and got in.

Tom watched as they drove off. He let them go and thoughtfully finished a cigarette, then tossed the butt out the window.

It annoyed him to see Kowalski and his partner talking and smiling like they were. Kowalski didn't have a right to be happy, to have friends. Another idea was beginning to edge into his mind, but Tom set it aside for the moment. There was something else he had to do first. He got out of the car.

This was the place where Jody lived. The fact that Kowalski was here meant they were onto him. How the hell. . . ?

Then Tom told himself that it didn't matter. The plans were rolling now and nothing the cops would do could stop him. Still, to know that Kowalski was getting so close rankled.

Tom reached the house and peered in through the front window, glad that Jody had stayed out at Holly Point to get things cleaned up. He couldn't see anything through the window, so he walked around the house. Through the back door, he could see a tall thin figure bent over the sink. The man was splashing water in his face.

Tom opened the screen door and stepped in quietly.

Not quietly enough, though. Some faint sound must have alerted the man because he turned around quickly. He squinted near-sightedly across the room. "Jody?" he said hesitantly. Then he fumbled for the glasses on the counter.

"No," Tom said softly. "It's not Jody." He kept one hand in his pocket.

"My God. You're Tom, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Where's Jody?"

"He's safe, if it's any of your business."

The skinny creep held out a hand. "Please, Tom, turn yourself in. Let Jody turn himself in. Before it's too late. You don't want to see him hurt, do you?"

"You're a real chickenshit faggot coward, ain't you? We're not scared of the cops."

"Can I talk to Jody? If I could just talk to him we might be able to fix things."

Tom realized that as the man was talking, he was edging toward a drawer. That made him angry. "You better stop right there," he warned.

Instead, the man lunged at him, empty-handed.

The first knife thrust was almost an accident. Tom pulled back quickly and stepped away. The man was staring at him, clutching at his stomach. Blood leaked out between his fingers, and he was crying. It was too bad, but the guy had brought it on himself. Besides, Jody didn't need him anymore.

"Please. . . help me." He fell to his knees.

Tom stabbed him again and he toppled over. He was still breathing, but quiet. Blood began to form a puddle on the shiny floor.

Tom walked out of the kitchen. It was a nice little house. Maybe he and Jody could live here later, when this was all over. The living room had a lot of books, as well as a big color television. He walked closer to the set to look at the framed photo on top. Jody and the other guy were standing in front of the house, holding onto a SOLD sign, and smiling. He wondered who had taken the picture.

There was one bedroom, small and tidy, the big bed neatly made up with a colorful patchwork quilt. Tom stared at the bed for a long time. He was angry again, suddenly, without knowing why. Stupid to get angry at a damned bed.

But he was. He knelt on the quilt and used the bloody knife to make long gashes in the mattress. Again and again he stuck the blade in and ripped. So caught up was he in the frenzy of the attack, that he was hardly aware of the rush of heat and the explosive climax until it was over.

He slid to the floor and huddled there, gasping for breath.

It was a noise from the kitchen that brought him back to reality. He straightened, listening, then jumped up and went back into the kitchen.

The man was crawling slowly toward the door. He left a vivid red trail as he moved.

Tom sighed. Some people just didn't know when they

were dead. In two steps he was across the room and a few seconds later the guy knew for sure that he was finished.

Tom cleaned up in the bathroom and left the body there on the kitchen floor.

He was very glad to get back to Holly Point. Jody had the Humpty Dumpty Fun Palace practically gleaming. It felt like home. Just like their bedroom when they were kids, this place belonged to them.

They sat on the floor, eating salami sandwiches. Tom didn't think anymore about the house in Azusa or the dead man.

Chapter 29

It was nearly two a.m. when the phone rang.

Spaceman swore groggily, reached out, swept the receiver up. Someday, he thought with a fuzzed corner of his mind, someday I'm actually going to sleep all the way through the night without this damned machine waking me up.

Actually, this time he didn't mind so much being disturbed, because his dreams hadn't been all that terrific. He kept seeing faces of people he thought he should recognize, but didn't. The people were all dead, and he seemed to see blame in their wide-open, staring eyes.

So he was almost glad when the phone wrecked his sleep.

He made a sound into the receiver, signifying that he was ready to talk.

"Is this Kowalski?" The voice was muffled, as if it were being filtered through a handkerchief.

"Yeah, so?"

"You're looking for your son, right?"

He sat up. "Who is this?"

"Never mind that. I'll do the talking. I might be able to help you find him."

"How could you do that?"

"Maybe I know where he is."

Spaceman fumbled for his cigarettes on the nightstand. "Either you know or you don't. If you know anything, I strongly suggest you tell me."

The voice chuckled. "Okay, I'll tell you. For a price."

"How much?"

"Gee, ain't it hard to know how much your son is worth?"

Spaceman flicked ashes toward the empty coffee cup, just missing. "How much?" he asked again.

"One hundred bucks. And cheap at that, right?"

"Fine. Give me your name and address. If the dope pans out, I'll mail the money."

"Whaddaya think I am, anyway?"

"I don't think you want to hear that, do you?"

"Fuck you. We do it my way or not at all."

"What's your way?"

There was the sound of a deep breath being taken. "That's better. Okay. There's an empty grocery store near Lincoln and Olympic."

He visualized a map. "Yeah, okay."

"Come there. Now. Bring the dough and be here in thirty minutes or the deal is off. Got that?"

Spaceman sighed, exhaling toward the ceiling. "I got it."

"Good." The connection was broken with a click.

He didn't get up right away. Instead, he finished the cigarette and replayed the phone conversation in his mind. It was probably nothing. Still, he had to take the chance. He rolled from the bed.

After some scrounging, and by raiding his poker stash, he managed to scrape up the hundred dollars. Then he dressed quickly.

It was fifteen minutes past the appointed time when he pulled up in front of the empty storefront. LoPressi and Sons read the fading sign over the door. The street was almost empty, except for an occasional car passing, and one old man pushing a shopping cart. He went from trash can to trash can, stopping by each one to paw through the contents, sometimes removing a new treasure to add to the pile already in the cart.

It didn't look like such a bad way to spend your life.

He got out of the car and walked to the front door, which was boarded up. He ducked into the alley and went around to the rear. The back door was ajar, and he stepped

through, into complete darkness. After two steps, he stopped.

"You're late," the same voice said, this time without benefit of handkerchief.

Spaceman didn't answer.

The room was suddenly flooded with light.

The boy standing there looked vaguely familiar, but maybe that was because he was just another punk, and they were all pretty much the same. He stared at Spaceman through barely opened eyes. "You bring the bread?"

"You have the dope?"

"Well, not exactly."

There was a sudden movement behind Spaceman, and the door slammed shut. He looked around, not really surprised to see three more kids standing there. He didn't think any of them were friends of Robbie's, but he couldn't be sure.

"This is real cute," he said.

"Hand over the money, and nothing bad has to happen here," the leader said.

"Where's Robbie?"

"Who the hell knows?" He laughed nastily. "Who the hell cares? He's a creep."

Spaceman had been a cop too long for a crack like that to bother him. Much. "Well, I guess our business is finished, then, isn't it?" He stepped to the side and toward the door. The boys blocked his way, four of them, staring him down. "This is pretty fucking stupid," Spaceman said.

"We don't think so. We think you're the stupid one."

That was a valid point. Spaceman sighed and held up one hand, like a traffic cop. "Why don't we end this right now, before you boys get into a lot of trouble?" He was starting to get mad.

"Give us the cash."

"Fuck you," Spaceman said shortly. He took another step toward the door.

One of the punks flashed a switchblade. "Maybe you need a little persuading," he said in a TV tough guy voice.

Something snapped inside Spaceman. Maybe it was seeing the knife that did it. Over the last several days, he'd had too much experience with just how much damage a blade could inflict on the human body. Maybe he was just tired. Or scared. Without even thinking about what he was doing, Spaceman shoved one hand inside his jacket; when the hand came out again, it held his gun. "Anybody moves even a hair, he's liable to end up in a lot of little pieces," he said tightly. "Any of you creeps ever see what a gun this size can do to a person's face?"

The boys froze. "Hey, man, cool it," the leader said. "It was just a joke, that's all. Can't you take a goddamned joke?"

"Am I laughing?"

"We didn't mean nothing."

"Do you know anything about where Robbie is?"

"No. I just heard that he'd split and you was looking for him."

"So you vermin thought you'd cash in on somebody else's troubles, is that it? You make me sick."

They were nervously watching the gun. "Look, man, why don't you just forget it? You go, we'll go. Pretend it never happened."

"I should blow you all away, and save the world a lot of trouble." Spaceman realized that he almost meant it. The amount of anger and hatred he felt for these kids scared him. He really wanted to kill the bastards, and maybe he'd do it.

"You're crazy, man," one of them said.

"Sure. Why shouldn't I be crazy? Everybody else in the fucking world is crazy. Why not me?"

One of the boys made a sudden move, probably trying to get away, and Spaceman lunged, jamming the gun barrel into his ribs. "I said, don't move!" he screamed in a voice that didn't sound like his own.

The boy began to cry.

The insane tableau remained intact for almost two minutes. Then, as suddenly as it had fled, his reason returned. He pulled the gun back. "Get the hell out of here," he said wearily. "If I ever see any of you again, I'll bust you. No matter if you're innocent as a virgin. I'll think of something dirty and I'll make it stick. Got that, creeps?"

They all nodded, without saying anything. Nobody moved for yet another moment; then, as one, they bolted through the suddenly opened door, and were gone.

Spaceman leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. Sweat made his whole body feel clammy. He wiped at his face with his sleeve.

It was a long time before he had the strength to leave the building and walk back to his car.

Chapter 30

BLUE wondered what the hell was bugging his partner.

Besides the case, of course, and the additional fact that his son was missing. Just those things were enough to make anybody crazy, but Blue decided that there was something else weighing on Spaceman. He came into the squadroom looking like a thing that had been warmed over once too often before being served.

Despite his curiosity, however, Blue hadn't been Kowalski's partner even this long without learning a few things along the way. He didn't ask why the man was the color of old yogurt or why his clothes looked even more than usually as if they'd been slept in.

They were still in the office when a report came in that Steven Lawrence's car had been found parked outside the Sweatshop. Although it seemed as if Spaceman had no interest at all in pursuing the matter, they drove over to the bar.

It was too early for the Sweatshop to be open, but the door was unlocked. A sign in the foyer proclaimed that auditions were being held. A crowd of about ten young men, apparently lured by the promise of a job and maybe fame, were waiting in line for a chance to show their stuff, whatever that might be.

Spaceman and Blue worked their way through the crowd and into the bar itself. "Excuse us," Spaceman said, raising his voice a little so he'd be heard over the conversation and muted rock music. "We're looking for D.C. Brigham?"

A woman at the end of the bar raised her head. "You found her, honey."

She wasn't exactly what they'd been expecting. For one

thing, she was a she, or the best damned imitation Blue had ever seen. Brigham looked like somebody's maiden aunt, wearing a well-cut and obviously expensive linen suit, with a rope of pearls that Blue knew had to be real. The eccentricity was expressed in the Billy Squier tee shirt worn with the suit, and in the vivid orange hair. Even with the hair, she was a good-looking woman.

She waved a long cigarette holder in their direction. "Come on over, dear, but I'll say right now, you're too old and rotund for the job. No offense." She squinted to look beyond Spaceman. "Blondie there, you might make it. Depends on what your body looks like out of that ice cream suit you're wearing."

Blue felt a flush of red flood his face as he stepped forward. "We're police officers," he said flatly, showing his badge. "Detectives Kowalski and Maguire."

"So sorreee," she said airily. "What brings you two down here?"

"One of your customers got himself killed the other night."

"I heard." Her face, all angles and not hiding her fifty years, but still attractive, grew serious. "He wasn't the first to die lately, was he? You people have to do something to stop all the pretty young men in this town from getting killed."

"We're trying," Spaceman said. "Did you know Lawrence?"

"Know him?" Her gaze flickered toward the small stage, where one of the hopeful waited, wearing only jeans and a smile. The smile was strained, but determined. "Well, not to speak of. Not much beyond the amenities. He was a pretty regular customer."

"Came in a lot, did he?"

"Once a week, maybe."

"And I suppose he left with a lot of different men?"

"He never left with anybody, as far as I know."

"He didn't?" Spaceman said skeptically.

She looked at him, seeming amused. "No. Oh, he might slip into the backroom or out into the parking lot for a little fun, but I think he always left alone."

"Except that night," Blue said. "Since his car was still in the lot."

She only shrugged.

"Did you see who he left with?"

"No."

"How about someone else?"

"I don't think so. Mick was off that night. Flu. So it was just Karl and me behind the bar. There was a big crowd in here. We were both too busy to pay much attention. Prince Charles could have left here with Henry Kissinger, and we wouldn't have noticed. Sorry. If I could help, I would, believe me."

They believed her, but that didn't make them any happier. Blue nodded their thanks, and they walked toward the door.

"Okay, sweet thing," they heard her say to the young man waiting on the stage. "Drop those jeans and let me see what you've got."

Neither of them turned around.

They were no sooner in the car than a message came in from McGannon. He wanted to see them immediately. Spaceman sighed and leaned his head back against the seat. "Maybe I'm getting too old for this kind of work."

"Shit," Blue replied.

There was a silence, then: "I almost killed some kids last night."

So. That was the problem. "What happened?"

Spaceman told him about the phone call and the events in the empty store. "I came so close to pulling the trigger, to blowing one of the bastards away," he said. "It scares me to think about it."

"They had a knife on you, right?"

Spaceman waved away the knife and its implications. "I screwed up, man. Lost fucking control."

"It happens to everybody once in a while."

Spaceman turned his head to look at him. "Yeah? When was the last time it happened to you? Shit, I doubt you ever even put your deodorant to the test."

Blue watched the traffic. "The last time I blew it," he said, "was a few years ago. A Vietcong colonel was asking me questions and he wasn't crazy about my answers. Blew me out of my frigging skull. So I know all about going crazy, partner. I could probably give lessons."

He parked and got out of the car quickly, without even waiting to see if Spaceman was following him.

"Jerry Potter is dead."

McGannon's words hung in the air for a long time.

Spaceman turned and hit the wall with his open hand and Blue sat down quickly.

McGannon gave them the moment, then said, "It must have happened just after you spoke to him. The cops out there found your card and called us just a little while ago. A knife was used on him."

Blue thought about the bright, sunny kitchen and the terrible lemonade. "Damn," he said. "It isn't fair."

McGannon shrugged. "John Kennedy once said that life isn't fair. Then he got his head blown off, so maybe he knew what he was talking about."

Spaceman turned around. "Was it Hitchcock?"

"Seems to have been. They got a description. From a passing birdwatcher, if you can believe that. Fits what we have on him."

Blue felt sick. "Was it both of them?" he asked. He couldn't believe—didn't want to believe, anyway—that Jody would have done this to someone who so obviously cared about him.

"No. The witness says only one man."

Spaceman was leaning against the wall. "Hitchcock must have trailed us out there. We led him right to Potter."

"Looks that way."

Spaceman shook his head. "Jesus, Maguire, we're a couple of real fuck-ups."

Then he walked out.

McGannon looked at Blue. "How's it going with you two?"

"Fine."

"No hassles?"

"We get along."

"Nobody else has been able to do that. Maybe he's mellowing in his old age."

Blue shrugged and left the office, too.

They spent most of the rest of the day talking back and forth with the Azusa cops. Facts were skimpy. One killer had apparently stabbed Jerry Potter to death. There was no evidence of sexual activity. Nothing seemed to be missing, although the bed was cut to shreds.

When quitting time finally came, they went across the street for a drink. They had that one and then another and then two more. Blue finally remembered that he had a late date. Sharon Engels was coming to his place for dinner after finishing work. He paid for the last round and left Spaceman still sitting at the table.

Chapter 31

SPACEMAN made his way very carefully up the steps to Mandy's apartment. Knowing just how much he'd consumed in the bar, he knew he had to be drunk. He didn't feel drunk, but that was undoubtedly just a joke that the gods were playing on him. Trying to give him a false sense of security, so that one wrong step would lead to a fall and a broken neck.

He walked with precise attention up the steps and tapped softly on the door.

Mandy was glad to see him. She always was. They went into the kitchen and she put a pan of water on for coffee. Waiting for the water to boil, she jiggled nervously around the room in panties and tee shirt. "Guess what," she said finally.

He was sitting at the table, not much feeling like guessing games. "What?" he said.

"I have a job."

"Terrific."

"The new road show of *A Chorus Line*." She put a cup down in front of him. "It means I'll be gone for at least six months."

He hadn't thought about that. He frowned and took a sip of the coffee. "Six months? Shit."

"I'll miss you, of course, but my career has to come first."

"I guess."

She bent down and gave him a quick hug. "I knew you'd understand. We've had some great times, but we both knew it couldn't be permanent."

"Sure. I understand."

"How about some supper?" She opened the freezer and began to rummage through the ice-shrouded contents.

Spaceman didn't understand anything at all. How could she just take off like this? What about him? What about their so-called relationship? The world had turned into a pretty shitty place if a broad could just take off and go running around the country for months at a time, without giving a thought to anyone else.

She emerged from the freezer finally, holding a package of lasagna. "This be okay?"

He nodded sullenly.

Maybe he could find a girl who knew how to make a decent cup of coffee. At least this gave him something to think about besides Jerry Potter's murder.

Blue had to stop at the liquor store for a bottle of special wine, so by the time he got home, he was already running twenty minutes behind schedule. And he wanted the meal with Sharon to be special.

He left the car in the driveway and stopped at the mailbox to pull out a handful of envelopes: bills, some bank statements, invitations to a couple gallery openings. He thumbed through the collection indifferently as he started for the house.

There was a slight noise in the bushes that lined the drive.

Maybe Merlin, his peripatetic tabby, had returned from his latest bout of wanderlust. He'd been gone almost a month this time. Blue half-turned. "Merlin? That you? Have you finally come home, you horny old bastard?"

The blow across the back of his head knocked him down. Dazed, but conscious, he fell forward into the grass. His face was pressed to the ground, and above him were voices.

"You hit him pretty hard. He's not dead, is he?"

"Of course not, dummy. Can't you see he's still breathing?" A foot nudged at his ribcage.

Blue waited for the punks to grab his wallet. Mugged in his own driveway. Shit. Some hotshot cop he was. They'd probably take his ring and the goddamned $3000 watch that was just a month old. Shit.

And his gun.

Double shit.

He kept his eyes closed. Someone knelt next to him and rough hands patted him down. The gun was lifted. Blue swore to himself, thinking about the paperwork ahead. Losing his weapon was bad news. Maybe he ought to do something, make some noise, try to fight them off.

The thought was there, but the body wouldn't or couldn't follow through. The brain couldn't make the arms or legs move.

"Get his feet," one of the voices said.

Hands grabbed him and tied his legs together with heavy rope. What the hell was going on? Since when did muggers tie their victims up? His hands were bound, too, behind his back. Blue started to get groggily worried. Something was happening, and he didn't think it was going to be good.

When he was effectively trussed up, the foot nudged him again, harder this time. "God, what stupid jerks these cops are. Get the car, Jody."

Jody. It all fell into place. Blue swallowed down a sudden rush of bile. For the first time in a long time, he felt as if dying were much too close.

The lasagna was crummy. The cheese on top was charred and the middle was still cool. But at least the food and a couple more cups of coffee sobered Spaceman up. He didn't feel any better, but he could see straight. Whether he liked what he was seeing was a different story.

He stretched out on the couch while Mandy did the dishes, half-sleeping through some made-for-TV movie

about a crazed rapist stalking Las Vegas. There was always something vaguely cheering about watching stories with crime set in some other city. He could watch without feeling responsible.

The last thing he needed on this particular night was something else to feel guilty about. The Jerry Potter killing had hit him hard; he couldn't stop thinking about the quiet gentleman they had spoken to. Neither could he stop feeling like people were dead because of something he, Kowalski, had done or failed to do. People kept dying and he wasn't one goddamned step closer to stopping it.

Mandy turned off the light in the kitchen and joined him on the couch. She was up emotionally, excited about the job, obviously ready for some heavy-duty fucking to celebrate.

Spaceman wasn't in the mood.

He should have been out there someplace trying to stop Tom Hitchcock. Or trying to find Robbie. There were victims to be avenged and it was his job to be sure they were. Instead, here he was, trying to work his hand into the blue silk panties of a twenty-year-old girl.

Where the hell were his priorities?

He knew that it wouldn't be any use to try talking to Mandy about it all. Rule number one was that he not talk about his work. He sighed and kept his hand where it was.

For the second time recently, he was almost glad when the phone rang. Not that he would admit it. "Sometimes," he said to McGannon, "your timing really sucks."

"There's a problem," McGannon said.

"What else? I didn't think you called just to wish me sweet dreams."

"Sharon Engels just called me. She was supposed to have dinner with Maguire at his place tonight."

"So? He got lucky."

"Maybe not. When she got there, no Maguire. His car was in the drive, there was mail all over the ground, and the house was dark."

Spaceman massaged his left temple wearily. "So what do you think?"

"I don't think anything yet. Except that maybe you should go over there and have a look around."

"Yeah, sure."

"That's a pretty classy neighborhood. Maybe somebody broke in and Blue caught them."

"I guess that's possible."

"Call me."

"I will."

He hung up.

The house was still dark when he got there. He checked the car quickly, but nothing seemed amiss. Spaceman collected the mail that was scattered across the lawn, then crouched down to examine the flattened grass. It looked to him as if something heavy had rested there. Half-crawling, he followed a faint trail through the yard. The object apparently had been dragged from its resting place to the curb. Spaceman stood there on the same curb, staring up and down the dark street for a few moments.

At last, he turned and walked to the house, pausing only long enough to pick up a bottle of wine that was lying in the grass. The front door was secure, so he walked around to the rear, climbing a few steps to the redwood balcony. The sliding glass door had been jimmied. He pushed it open easily and went in. Nothing in the living room seemed out of place, so he walked up the winding stairs to the loft bedroom. The bed was made; there was a single silk tie draped over a chair. Nothing else was out of order, as far as he could tell.

The house was very quiet.

Spaceman glanced into the bathroom before going back downstairs. He didn't really know what he was looking for, but it was in the front hall that he found it, written on the wall in a familiar bright purple.

"This little piggy is missing. One more for you, Kowalski."

Spaceman read the words again and then once more. It didn't help. He sank down onto the couch, so tired all of a sudden that his legs wouldn't hold him.

"Shit," he said, without emotion.

Then he reached for the telephone.

Chapter 32

He had never really known how long twenty-four hours could be. The day and night following Maguire's disappearance dragged unbelievably, and not because he didn't have enough to do.

He was in charge of the team that canvassed the neighborhood, setting up roadblocks and knocking on doors to find out if anyone had seen something that might give them even a vague hint of where to go. Nobody had. They might have been living in palaces instead of slums, but the people around here didn't seem any more observant than the inner-city folks.

The press had finally jumped on the case and they were playing it for all the thing was worth. On the front page of the *Times* was a rehash of the murders ten years ago of the elder Hitchcocks, the story updated to include Tom's hospitalization and escape. Each of the current murders was discussed at length, with heart-rending quotes from Chris Blair's aunt. The Lowe family was "unavailable for comment." Steven Lawrence was named as having "no known relatives." Lovers, apparently, didn't count in the obits.

Jerry Potter's sister had nothing to say.

The least space of all was devoted to the missing cop, but they hadn't had much time on that angle yet. Spaceman knew what would happen when they found out that Maguire was not only a cop, but a millionaire several times over as well.

He tossed the paper aside with a grunt of disgust and looked up to see McGannon standing next to his desk.

"You need to get away from here for a while," McGannon said.

"Yeah, you're right. Maybe I'll take a trip to Mexico. Lie on the beach; swim some. Take in a bullfight. Fuck a few señoritas."

"Go home and sleep for a few hours."

"Oh, that's what you meant."

"That's what I meant. Go."

"You want to know something?" Spaceman searched for a cigarette and realized that he was all out. "I feel like I've been sleeping all day. Like this is just some kind of dream. The whole world seems kind of vague." He then realized that he was talking nonsense and shut up.

"Go home," McGannon said again. "Consider that an order, if it helps."

"Yes, sir." Spaceman saluted.

He left the office and walked around the corner to the diner. Joe gave him change for the cigarette machine, and for once, was mercifully out of good advice. While Spaceman was tearing into the cigarettes, the door opened again and Sharon Engels came in.

"I was looking for you," she said.

"Well, you found me. Why don't you become a detective? I can never find anybody."

"Can we talk? Just for a minute. I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

He smiled. "Sweetheart, if you knew how much caffeine is already coursing through my fucking veins, you'd withdraw that offer." Nevertheless, he sat down. "Gimme a glass of oj," he said to Joe.

"Better choice," the old guy approved.

Sharon slid onto the stool next to his. "Any word on Blue?"

"No."

"What do you think?"

"What do I think?" His shaking fingers finally got the

cigarettes open. He offered her one, which she refused, and then lighted one for himself. "I think Maguire's in a hell of a mess."

"Is he alive?"

Spaceman shrugged, picking up the glass Joe had set in front of him.

"Just a shrug? What kind of an answer is that?"

"It's the best goddamned answer I have right now." He downed the juice in one long drink, then set the empty glass back on the counter. "You and Maguire have a little something going, is that it?"

"We're friends." She sounded fierce. "Damn it, there hasn't been time yet for anything else. There might be more, if we have the time."

"I hope you do. Nothing would make me happier."

Sharon looked at him; her eyes were very dark. "You don't sound like you care at all."

"I care. Sure I do."

"Well, no one could tell by looking at you."

"Sorry about that. What should I be doing? What would satisfy your sense of propriety? Should I throw a chair through the goddamned window over there? Or maybe I should shed a few tears about how rotten it all is?"

After a moment, she patted his arm. "I'm an idiot. Sorry."

"Don't mention it," he said. "I have to go."

Instead of going directly home, Spaceman drove slowly up Hollywood Boulevard, looking for his son. Twice he parked the Jeep and trudged to the sidewalk to show the snapshot to groups of young freaks.

Nobody knew anything.

Inside his apartment, he pulled off the sweat-stinking suit and dropped it into a heap on the floor. He was standing in the kitchen, drinking a glass of Alka-Seltzer, when there was a knock on the door.

He sighed, too tired even for despair, and went to answer it in his shorts.

Karen was standing in the hall, but not for long. As soon as the door opened, she pushed by him, and then she was standing in his living room. "You bastard," she said in a small, tight voice.

He shook his head a little, hoping to clear away some of the cobwebs, but it didn't help much. "What?"

"I've been calling and calling, and you haven't answered one of my messages. You haven't called or anything!" She paused and inhaled deeply, obviously trying not to cry. "Where is Robbie? Why haven't you been looking for my son?"

"My son, too," he said. Unable to stay on his feet any longer, he almost fell into a chair. "And I have been looking."

"In your spare time, right?"

"Whenever I goddamned could. Karen, have you seen a paper or watched the news? Do you have any idea at all what's going on in this city?"

She shook her head.

"There happens to be a madman out there. A madman who kills people." He tried to tally the number, including the hospital aide, excluding Blue. "At least five in the last couple of weeks."

"I don't care about that. I want my son." She pushed one hand through her hair helplessly, glaring at him. "You never change, do you? Always have to be the hero. Always have to save the world. Well, what about your own son? Can't you care as much for him? Can't your heart bleed a little for Robbie?"

"He ran away, damn it. Robbie is not a little boy. He ran away of his own free will, and from what I've been able to find out, he's probably shacked up with his girlfriend right now."

She was pale. "Where did you hear that?"

"I heard. But I'm still looking."

"Find him then!" She was screaming now.

"I will. But right now I have to find that maniac." He didn't raise his voice, mostly because he didn't have the energy.

"Let somebody else do that."

"It's my case. He's killing these people because I put him away ten years ago. Now he's out again, killing again, and I have to stop him." He touched his chest with one finger. "Me."

"Not you."

"He's kidnapped my partner." Maybe, just maybe, he's even killed my son. Spaceman thought the words, wanted to scream them at her. But he didn't.

Karen turned and walked into the kitchen. He watched as she searched for a clean glass, managed to find one, and swallowed a pill. "I don't know how much more of this I can take," she said, walking back into the living room.

"I'm still looking for Robbie," he said wearily. "But I have these other things to do, too. Please, Karen. If I don't get some sleep soon, I'm gonna crack up. Then I won't be any good to anyone. Go home."

"Maybe I should hire a private detective."

"Fine. Do that. Call me tomorrow, and I'll give you a couple names."

She stood there for another moment, then turned and left, slamming the door.

Spaceman stayed where he was and finished the flat Alka-Seltzer.

When he finally got into bed, he couldn't sleep. He stared at the ceiling for a long time, then switched on the radio and listened to the news.

In the middle of a report on a new fire outbreak in the hills, Spaceman finally lost consciousness.

Chapter 33

BLUE forced himself to wake up.

For a long time, it had been easier just to stay asleep. That way he couldn't feel the pain from the ropes still holding him, or from the kicks inflicted on his body. But part of him finally accepted that crawling into a hole and trying to pretend that none of this was happening wouldn't help at all. He had to get a grip on things.

So he opened his eyes.

A giant green dragon leered down at him.

He closed his eyes again. Careful, man, he thought. Careful, you don't want to blow it now. Hold onto a little bit of sanity. He took a couple of deep breaths and opened his eyes again. The dragon was still there. Blue shook his head slightly, refuting the absurdity of it all.

"There really is a dragon," a voice said suddenly. "It isn't your imagination."

Blue managed to turn his head slightly, enough to see the young man sitting just a few feet away. "Hello, Jody," he said, although it wasn't easy to talk with a tongue that felt about twice as big as it should have.

Jody looked surprised. "How'd you know my name?"

"I know all about you, Jody. Except for one thing."

"What?"

"How the hell did you ever get yourself into such a mess?"

The face went blank, shutting out Blue and what he was saying. "I better tell Tommy you're awake."

"Oh, yes. Tell Tommy. He's the boss around here, right?"

Jody didn't say anything.

"Can you at least tell me where the hell I am? And why there are dragons and elephants watching me?"

"You're in the Humpty Dumpty Fun Palace," Jody said shortly. He started out of the room, then paused. "But I don't think it's going to be much fun," he said. Strangely, there wasn't any hint of sarcasm or even threat in the words. There was only a sort of weary resignation.

"He's awake."

Tom was sitting outside, reading a paperback western. He looked up at Jody's words. "For real this time? No more drifting?"

Jody shook his head. "No more drifting."

"Good." Tom stood, stretched. "Too fucking hot." Then he went inside.

After a moment, Jody followed. Tom was standing over Maguire, not saying anything when Jody joined them. "Well," he finally said, drawling the words out like a cowboy. "Whattaya think?"

Maguire met his gaze. "I think it's funny that you don't look like a fucking maniac."

Tom's foot moved swiftly, colliding yet again with the tied man's ribs. Maguire grunted, but didn't say anything. "We have a real smartass pig here," Tommy said. "A regular funny guy." He kicked again. "How funny do you feel now?"

Maguire's face was pale and bright with sweat. "Not terribly," he gasped out.

"Good. Glad to hear it. Nothing makes me sicker than a cop cracking jokes."

"Could I have a drink of water? Please?"

"Nice manners. You say please."

Maguire seemed to speak through gritted teeth. "Miss Puddingham would be proud of me."

Tom was running the toe of his foot up and down Maguire's ribcage lightly. "Who the hell is that?"

"The mistress of the Puddingham School of Deportment for Young Ladies and Gentlemen. I graduated with honors when I was seven."

"Which were you? A young lady or a gentleman?"

"Ha, ha."

Tommy just shook his head. "You're the crazy one here. I could kill you just as easily as look at you. Why don't you act like a man that close to dying?"

Maguire didn't say anything.

Jody didn't like the way things were going. He stepped closer. "Tommy?"

"What?"

Jody wiped his sweaty hands on the front of his shirt. "You can't kill him now. We need him for bait. Isn't that what you said before?" He tried not to sound as desperate as he felt.

Tommy frowned, then nodded. "For the moment." He took a needle out of his pocket. "But I don't need to keep listening to his big mouth."

Jody watched as Tommy injected more of a knock-out drug into Maguire.

"That should keep you quiet for a while," he said with satisfaction. Then he turned to Jody. "I'm going to buy a paper," he said. "You stay with funny man here, and if he tries anything, why just tap him." It was much more than a tap that his shoe applied to Maguire's ribs. He winked at Jody and left. A moment later they could hear the sound of a car engine.

Jody sat on the floor again, staring at Maguire.

The cop's eyes were only half open, but he was still awake enough to talk. "Can ya' tell me somethin'?" he said in a thick voice.

"What?"

Maguire seemed to be making a great effort to speak. "I don't pretend to understand any of this," he said slowly. "But what I don't understand most is Potter."

Jody bit his lip, tasting blood. "How do you know about Jerry?"

Maguire's eyes opened just a little. "We talked to him."

Jody leaned forward eagerly. "You did? Is he okay?"

"You don't even know, do you?"

"What?"

Instead of answering, Maguire shook his head. "I need a drink."

Jody got up and went into the other room. He could see himself reflected over and over in the distorted mirrors that lined the walls; the effect made him dizzy. He poured some bottled water into a Dixie cup. There was a small flicker of fear inside, but he tried not to think about it.

He took the cup to Maguire, holding it while the other man drank. "What about Jerry?" he asked then.

"Tom killed him."

The words fell like lead balls. Jody's fingers crushed the cup involuntarily. "What?"

"Tom went into the house and stabbed Jerry to death. Just like you stabbed the others. Jerry's dead."

"No, please." It was an anguished groan. Jody tried to fight against the great trembling darkness threatening to swallow him. "You can't say that."

Maguire's eyes suddenly closed and his head fell forward.

"No," Jody said again. "You're lying." He grabbed Maguire by the shirt and shook him. "Tell me it was a lie."

But Maguire was out cold.

Jody dropped him. He stood shakily and walked out of the building. His legs felt like they were going to fold under him. He took deep gulps of the heavy humid air.

Maguire's words had to be a great big lie. Tommy wouldn't....Jody wiped his mouth with the back of one hand. Oh God...Oh shit....

Jody ran across the compound through the front gate, to

the phone booth just beyond. There was no sign of the car returning. Jody dug through his pockets for change, and when he found it dialed without thinking about what he would say.

All he needed was to hear the familiar voice on the other end of the line, and he would hang up.

"Hello?" It was a woman's voice.

"Who is this?" Jody asked, although he thought he should know.

"Lainie Potter. Who's this?"

Jerry's sister. She lived in Malibu and came out to see them every so often. Jody had always liked her. "Let me talk to Jerry, please."

There was a silence. "Haven't you heard? Jerry is dead."

Jody sagged against the wall of the phone booth.

"Who is this? Who's calling?" Then Lainie's voice broke. "Jody? Is this you? Oh, Jody, how could you do it? Jerry loved you and you killed him."

Jody's hand lost its strength suddenly and the phone fell. He leaned forward out of the booth and threw up, heaving again and again, until there was nothing left inside him, as his body shook with violent efforts to expel the knowledge.

After a long time, he straightened and retrieved the dangling phone. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

Lainie's voice sounded calmer when she spoke again. "Where are you, Jody? Tell me, please."

"I can't." He was quiet, staring back into the park and into his memory. "Remember that time we had the picnic?" he said.

"Picnic?"

"Yeah. On my birthday, three years ago. God, that was such a good day for me."

"For Jerry, too," she said softly.

Jody felt a sob breaking free inside his chest. He hung up the phone quickly. Tommy would be back anytime

now, and he would expect to find Jody inside with Maguire.

There wasn't any time to cry for Jerry right now.

Chapter 34

"Is this Robbie Kowalski's father?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

The question was ignored. "Is it true what I heard?"

"What?"

"That him and Becky Malloy ran off together?"

Spaceman was drinking a beer for breakfast. "Could be. Why should you care?"

"I seen Becky last night. I know where it is she's staying."

"Did you see Robbie?"

"Nope. But if you figure they're together. . ."

He sighed and took another gulp of the warmish beer. "I suppose that now you want to make a deal with me."

"A deal?" The voice, youthfully sexless, giggled. "Oh, no, sir. I don't want money."

"Then why are you telling me this? Pure altruism, I suppose?"

"Al who?"

He shook his head. "Never mind. Look, kiddo, I've already been shafted once. Why are you suddenly coming forward to help?"

"You want the absolute truth?"

"That would be a nice change."

The caller took a deep breath. "I just want to get back at that snooty Becky Malloy. She's a rich bitch, thinks she's a fucking queen or something. I want to see her in trouble. This should settle her case pretty good. Don't you think?"

Nothing like good healthy hatred as a motivation. "I think. So where did you see her?"

"She was carrying a box of Kentucky Fried Chicken into the Sleepy Time Motel, on Ocean Boulevard. Room seventeen."

"You're sure it was Becky?"

"Hey, I know the bitch. We've been in school together since fucking kindergarten. It was her, all right. For sure."

"Well, thanks for calling."

"She's gonna get it now, right?"

"Without doubt."

There was a sigh of exquisite pleasure from the other end of the line.

Spaceman hung up. He leaned against the counter and finished the beer. The few hours sleep he'd finally managed to get hadn't done anything except make him feel worse. His eyes felt like they were full of sand, and he had a headache that ran through his entire body.

He didn't want to bother with this now. If Robbie and the bitch were screwing around in the Sleepy Time, it was a pretty stupid thing for them to be doing, but it wasn't exactly going to shake the foundations of the world. He had to keep trying to find Maguire. If it wasn't too late already.

But if he got this settled, he could concentrate on more important things than a couple of horny kids. Also, he could forget about the dead boy in Lompoc.

He reached for the phone again and dialed the office, asking for McGannon. "What's the word?" Spaceman said when the other man got on the line.

"Nothing," he said, sounding tired. "I suppose that's good in a way."

"Good?"

"Well, we haven't found a body yet." The words were flat, hopeless. Cop words.

Spaceman pitched the empty beer can across the room. It just missed the wastebasket, which figured. "Okay," he said, giving briskness a try and missing with that, too. "I'll

be in as soon as I can. There's a stop I have to make first."

"Oh?"

"I got a tip on where my son might be. I need to check it out."

"Good luck."

"I'm about due."

He hung up and headed for the bathroom.

The air outside was heavy and sluggish. Spaceman could see a thin line of dark clouds moving in from the west. Maybe there would be some rain, please God, and the damned grip of heat would be broken. According to the radio news, the authorities were hoping for rain, too, to help with fighting a new rash of fires.

The Sleepy Time Motel was about what he had expected it would be. Fifteen dollars a night and no questions asked. He went into the small office. The young black man behind the desk was reading one of the underground sex papers and watching *The $25,000 Pyramid*. "Room seventeen," Spaceman said.

The clerk was barely interested. He glanced at a register open on the desk. "Mr. and Mrs. Jones," he said. He licked a fingertip and turned the page of the paper.

"What do they look like?"

"Beats me."

"You didn't check them in?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. But even if I did, I don't know what they look like."

Spaceman reached out and pushed the newspaper down so that he could see the man's face. "You're not a very observant type, is that it?"

"I don't get paid to be observant."

"And you earn every penny you make," Spaceman said. He turned and walked out.

He went to room seventeen. On another day, he would

have used a little finesse on this kind of thing. But he was hot and tired and worried. And mad. He pounded the door with the heel of his hand. "Open up."

"Who is it?" The voice was female, tentative.

"Police. Open the door, please."

There was a flurry of soft, unintelligible conversation. Then: "Go away." It was a deeper voice, but no less tentative.

Spaceman swore. He judged the strength of the door carefully and decided that it was nothing but flimsy plywood covered with veneer. Cheap. He took two steps back and threw himself against the door. There was a cracking sound, but the damned thing held. He leveled his shoulder against it again and this time the wood shattered.

Spaceman stumbled into the room.

A young blonde girl, wearing only the top half of a pair of man's pajamas, was sitting on the bed. She was eating a Mounds bar and drinking a can of Diet-Rite. *The $25,000 Pyramid* seemed to be a popular show, because she was watching it too, or had been. Now she was staring at Spaceman.

The man standing by the bed wasn't Robbie. He was tall, built like an ex-jock, about forty years old. At the moment, he was looking sort of sick. "Oh, shit," he said.

"Becky Malloy?" Spaceman asked, rubbing his shoulder gingerly. He'd have a bruise there tomorrow.

She smiled at him smugly. "Becky Rostow," she said, waving the hand that still held a half-eaten candy bar. The third finger wore a thin gold band. "We went to Vegas and got married."

"Congratulations," Spaceman said shortly. "Who the hell are you?"

"Al Rostow," the bridegroom said in a low voice.

"She's underage, you know."

He nodded.

"And you did it anyway?"

"We love each other," the girl said fiercely. "We've been in love for over a year." She was looking at Rostow; Spaceman wondered what the hell she saw. It certainly wasn't the half-naked middle-aged man with the thinning hair and emerging gut who stood there. "He was my history teacher."

"A teacher," Spaceman repeated.

"Yes," Rostow said. Then he smiled weakly. "Until now."

"You got that right, I think." Spaceman shook his head. "You people have really fucked up."

They looked like they knew it.

It took him over an hour to get the whole mess straightened out. Becky seemed to have a better grip on things than did Rostow. She only shrugged when Spaceman said he'd have to call her parents. "I knew the honeymoon would have to end sometime," was her only reply.

Spaceman asked her about Robbie.

It wasn't very nice, what she had to say. While Rostow, pants on by then, sat to one side and listened, Becky told Spaceman how she had used Robbie as a cover. Pretending to like him and going out with him only so her parents wouldn't suspect the truth about the affair with Rostow.

Before they went to Vegas, she told Robbie the truth. How did he react, Spaceman wanted to know. She shrugged. That was all.

Spaceman felt hurt for his son.

He finally called the Malloys, told them where Becky was, and left the newlyweds to await whatever befell them next. He almost felt a little sorry for Rostow; he didn't stand a chance in hell, caught between the Malloy women.

McGannon handed him a sheaf of messages as they passed in the hall. Spaceman sat at his desk and thumbed through them quickly. Most of it was worthless. Karen had

called three times. He jotted down a reminder to himself to call her about the private dicks.

The jerks in Lompoc sent another memo, still trying to find out if anybody had a missing person who fit the ID of the dead boy, but although the memo said "see attached photo," there was no picture attached. Spaceman swore. He had to call them.

Another note caught his attention. Someone by the name of Lainie Potter had called a short time earlier. The message was to call her back as soon as possible. He picked up the phone and dialed the number.

"Hello?"

"Miss Potter? This is Detective Kowalski. You called me?"

"Yes, I thought you should know."

"About what?"

"Jody called here early this morning."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. I spoke to him myself."

"What did he say?"

Her voice held the same tone of quiet calm that Jerry Potter's had. "He asked for my brother. I don't think he knew that Jerry was dead. When I told him, he became very upset." She paused. "I don't understand. The police here told me that Jody and his brother were responsible for the recent murders."

"Yes. For the others. But it looks like your brother was killed by Tom Hitchcock alone. Jody seemed to have nothing to do with it."

She sighed deeply. "Well, that's something."

"Is it?" He found himself wondering what the person who went with the pleasant voice looked like.

"It's a lot, in fact. The thought that Jody could have done that to Jerry broke my heart. At least my brother didn't have to face that before he died."

Spaceman thought he understood. "Did Jody give you any idea where he was calling from?"

"No. He just asked for Jerry, and I told him. He got very upset. I think he threw up. Then he came back on the line. He talked about a picnic."

"A picnic?"

"Yes. Three years ago, on his birthday. Jerry, Jody, a friend of mine, and I all had a picnic."

"Why would he mention that?"

"It was a very. . .a very nice day. He said it was the first time he'd ever been on a picnic."

"Where?"

"Where was the picnic, you mean?"

Spaceman realized that he was sitting on the edge of his chair. He forced himself to relax. "Yes."

She was quiet for a moment. "I don't remember exactly. Some amusement park."

"Disneyland, you mean? Knott's Berry Farm?"

"No, not one of those. This was a small, family-run place. Out in the country somewhere."

"You can't be more specific?"

"I'm afraid not. Is it important?"

"Probably not. But if it comes to you, call me back, would you, please?"

"Sure, of course."

He cleared his throat. "I'm very sorry about your brother."

"So am I. Jerry was a very nice guy."

Spaceman hung up thoughtfully. An amusement park was not a good place to hide, at least right in the middle of the summer season. Still, it couldn't hurt to snoop a little. And he sure as hell didn't have anything better to hang his hopes on.

He opened a drawer and started looking for a map.

Chapter 35

BLUE woke again. It was even harder this time than it had been the last. He rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling. The faces of the dragons and other creatures still looked down on him. There was no way of knowing how long he'd been here. Not that he cared much. His hands and feet were getting numb, leading to unpleasant thoughts of gangrene. He'd seen that a couple times in Nam. It wasn't pretty.

What the hell kind of cop could he be with no hands or feet?

For that matter, what the hell kind of cop was he now?

Before he was forced to pursue that line of thought, Jody came in, carrying a paper plate and cup. "I brought you some food," he said dully. "Are you hungry?" Jody seemed to have grown years older in the time Blue had been here. His face was pale and lined, and his hands shook.

Blue opened his mouth to speak, but his throat was so dry that all that emerged was a croak. He mustered up a little moisture and swallowed before trying again. "Yeah. But I can't eat like this."

"I know." Jody set the plate and cup down and knelt beside him. "I'll untie your hands. You won't try anything stupid, will you?"

"No. Cross my heart and hope—" He broke off.

Jody stared at him for a moment, then shook his head and went to work on the knots.

Blue closed his eyes briefly at the cramping pains that ran through his arms as the rope was removed. He tried to

shake some feeling into his hands. "Thanks," he said. "But are you sure Tom won't mind?"

"He's asleep." Jody moved the food within Blue's reach.

Blue managed to get his fingers working. There was a salami sandwich and some potato chips on the plate. He took a sip from the cup and found Kool-Aid. It all tasted wonderful.

Jody was across the room, sitting with his back against the mirror. His eyes, although they watched Blue, did so without interest.

Blue didn't speak until the sandwich was half-gone. He took a sip of the sweet drink. "Did you ask him why?" he said.

Jody blinked. "What?"

"Tom. Did you ask him why he killed Jerry?"

"No." It was a whisper. "I didn't say anything about it."

"Why? Are you afraid of him?"

"Tommy wouldn't ever hurt me."

Blue crunched a stale chip thoughtfully. "You say Tommy wouldn't hurt you. What the hell was he doing when he stabbed Jerry Potter to death? Doesn't that hurt you?"

Jody was chewing on a fingernail. He nodded.

"Doesn't that hurt even more than if he'd put the knife in you?"

"Yes." He bent forward suddenly, clutching at his stomach.

"Well, then, don't you want to know why?"

"I can't ask him. He's my brother."

"Is that why you helped him kill the others?"

"I guess so. Maybe. Who knows. It was just something I got caught up in. The. . .excitement. It just sort of took me over." He shook his head. "Probably you can't understand that."

Blue felt a little dizzy suddenly. The past intruded upon him with a fierce vengeance. The dirty little villages, one

after another, the sound of gunfire, the smell of blood. He could remember the vicious surge of adrenaline that filled him, that kept his finger on the trigger of the damned M-16.

"Maybe I understand more than you think," he said.

"Well, then." Jody made a helpless gesture with one hand, then went back to chewing on the nail. "Besides, I owe him."

"Why?"

"Because. . . because it was all my fault." He ducked his head. "It was because of me he killed them. They deserved to die. Those people should not have been allowed to bring children into the world."

"Tom did what he did. You're not at fault for the deaths of your parents."

Jody shook his head again. "I was the one who told the police. I told them Tommy did it and they locked him up." He smiled bitterly. "They should have given him a fucking medal for wasting those two, but they called him crazy and locked him up."

"But what about the boys?"

"I feel bad about them. I felt bad all along." He was quiet for a moment. "I feel worse now."

"Why?"

"Because it hurts so much. The ones who died must have had people who cared about them."

"Like you cared about Jerry."

"Yes. And it hurts." He shrugged.

"Jody, it's not to late to stop this. We can get Tom back into the hospital where he belongs. You can still make a life for yourself."

He smiled faintly. "You think so? When the hell did they start teaching cops to bullshit?"

"I'm not trying to bullshit you. It wouldn't be the life you had before, but you could make something of it."

"I already started life over again," Jody said. "Twice.

Once when I was thirteen and then again when I met Jerry. I'm too tired to try again."

"Christ, man, you're only twenty-three years old."

"Yeah, I know. Hell of a thing, isn't it?"

They were quiet for a moment. Blue finished off the last of the Kool-Aid. "Would you like to know something?"

"What?"

"The last thing Jerry said to us. That we should be sure to call him when we found you. He knew that you would need his help. He said that you two were a real family, and that he was willing to fight for what you had."

Jody shook his head, as if willing him to shut up.

"It was probably about five minutes after he said that when Tom came in. And killed him. Jerry never had a chance."

"Enough. Please. For god's sake, give me a break. Are you finished eating?"

"Yeah. But I need to take a leak."

"Use the cup."

Blue shrugged. "Forget it then."

"Up to you." Jody crossed the room and bent down to retie the rope around Blue's wrists.

Blue didn't let the opportunity go; as his old man always said, a chance might come by just once, so you damned well better grab for it. That philosophy had made Maguire senior a very rich man. Blue hoped that the same kind of thinking might now save his life.

He crashed an elbow into the side of Jody's head, sending him sprawling. Before Jody could regain his balance, Blue butted him in the stomach. As Jody fell, his head struck the wall and he was still.

Blue instantly began to work on the knot at his feet, cursing his still awkward fingers. At last, though, he managed to get free. He tried to stand, but his legs just wouldn't work, so he crawled to the entranceway and peered into the next room. He could see Hitchcock

stretched out on top of a sleeping bag, apparently asleep.

Blue edged out into the hallway. The floor seemed to tilt suddenly and he scrabbled for a hold. His reflection bounced around the hall. He stopped to take a deep, steadying breath. Fun house, shit, this was a torture chamber.

Once when he was just a kid, maybe four, the old man took him to a carnival with a place like this. All mirrors and slanting floors. Blue could remember the feeling of utter panic that seized him then, as he ran in helpless circles, crying and trying to find his way out.

Finally one of the attendants came in and rescued him. Outside, the whole crowd, except for his father, was laughing. The old bastard just shook his head and took him home. Blue knew, even then, that he'd failed somehow to be what he should have been.

He tightened his lips. This time he couldn't let himself fail. Besides, it was easy to find the way out, because the door had been left propped open, probably in an attempt to catch whatever stray breeze might appear. Blue headed for that open door. He moved slowly, both to cut down on the chance of noise, and because his body just wouldn't go any faster.

It seemed to take forever, but at last he reached the exit. Half-crawling and half-rolling, he made it down the slight ramp that led into the building. The ramp had a metal handbar running its length, where eager customers must have once lined up to gain admittance. Using that bar, he managed to get himself pulled into a standing position.

He rested for just a few seconds, breathing heavily from the effort, and wondering just how long Jody would be out. The blow to the head hadn't been that hard. As he started across the compound toward the entrance of the park, the thought came to him that maybe Jody hadn't

been unconscious at all, but only faking it. Maybe Jody wanted him to get away.

When Blue got closer to the gate, he could see the phone booth just beyond. His cramped legs eased and his gait speeded up. He reached the booth and leaned against it as a hand lifted the receiver.

Only then did it occur to him that he needed a dime; this wasn't one of those up-to-date models that you could get the operator with, even without money. Blue searched his pockets quickly. Nothing, not a damned thing. He closed his eyes for a moment. Shit.

"Need a dime?" The voice was mocking.

He opened his eyes and stared into the face of Tom Hitchcock. "Yeah. Will you lend me one? I'm good for it."

"You're a real bastard, aren't you?"

"Yeah, maybe so. But I'm fun at parties." He looked beyond Tom and saw Jody standing there, rubbing his head. There was no way of telling if the look of pain he wore was real or faked.

Hitchcock pulled him out of the booth, twisting both arms behind him again. Blue thought, fleetingly, about putting up a fight, but his better judgement prevailed. "Don't be no hero," his old sergeant used to say.

Tom dragged him back across the compound and into the building, where he threw Blue down like something he was getting very tired of. "Tie him again," he ordered in an angry voice. "And try to do it right this time."

As Jody started to work on the ropes again, Tom pulled the needle out of his pocket. "I'm gonna be sure you don't give us no more trouble. This is some very special stuff that I've been saving. This stuff used to give me dreams all in color."

"I always dream in color," Blue said tightly. "So I'll pass, if you don't mind."

"I do mind, in fact. You've got no choice."

Jody didn't skimp on the knots this time. When he was finished, he stepped back as Tom bent down and jabbed Blue's arm with the needle. He depressed the plunger all the way. "Sweet dreams, piggie," he whispered, his lips right next to Blue's ear.

Blue tried to pull away. Tom laughed softly.

When they were gone, Blue didn't even try to struggle. He just rested there on the floor and let whatever Tom had shot him full of take over. It was so easy to do, lazy, and not bad. The slow curtain of darkness that was descending seemed almost comforting.

Dimly, coming from the other room, but seeming to be from another planet, Blue could hear their voices.

"I'm sorry about messing up, Tommy."

"Never mind. It happens, and no harm was done."

"How long is this going to last?"

"I don't know. As long as it takes. Why? Are you still in a hurry to get home?"

"No. I don't want to go back there. Ever."

"Good. You'd rather stay with me, right?"

"Whatever."

"You okay? You seem kinda down."

"I'm all right."

"Maybe we could have a little party, just you and me. Come here. . . isn't that better? Feels good, huh?"

"Sure. It feels fine."

Blue tried to stop listening, but the sounds from the next room got all mixed up with the dreams in his mind. He couldn't tell which was real and which fantasy. It didn't seem to matter much anyway.

Chapter 36

"SHIT."

Spaceman folded the map and pushed it aside. Joe refilled the coffee cup. "Problem?"

"I was trying to follow up on something. A hunch. But I guess it's a bust." He added sugar and milk to the coffee, hoping that this third cup would give him a burst of energy.

"What?" Joe pressed. "I know this city, this whole area, better than anybody else you're likely to meet."

"Yeah, sure," Spaceman muttered. After a moment, when he realized that he had no idea, not one, about where to go next or what to do, he said again, "Shit."

Joe was still standing there, polishing some glasses.

"Somebody mentioned an amusement park," Spaceman said finally, half-angrily. "The perp went there a couple years ago, and I just thought that might be where they're hiding now. But that's stupid. Who could hide in the middle of an amusement park?"

Joe frowned. "Unless it ain't open anymore."

"I thought of that. But nothing seems to fill the bill, not anywhere within a reasonable distance of the city."

Joe finished with the glasses and tucked the polishing rag into his belt loop. "Holly Point," he said succinctly.

"What?"

"Holly Point Park. Used to take my kids out there, years ago. Heard it closed down."

"It's not on my map."

"Hell, it was just a small place. And if it's a new map, it wouldn't be there anyway." Joe opened the map again,

searched for a moment, then pointed. "Right there is where Holly Point used to be."

Spaceman looked. It was a couple hours from the city, close to where Potter and Jody had lived. "You say it's closed down now?"

"For a couple years, I think."

"I wonder. . ." Spaceman folded the map again, quickly this time. "Thanks, Joe. Catch me on the coffee later."

"Forget it. Good luck, Kowalski."

He went back to the office and shoved the map back into the drawer, at the same time taking out some extra rounds for his gun. Then he picked up the phone and dialed, but Potter's number was busy. To hell with it, he decided, just as easy to stop there and check with her in person. Besides, it would give him a chance to see what she looked like.

Spaceman realized that he was excited, the way he sometimes felt when a big case took the right turn. Holly Point was a long shot, but at least it was a shot, and better than anything else he'd come up with so far. Until now, Hitchcock had made things go all his way. But not now.

He was operating on the thesis that Maguire was still alive. What would be served by killing him this early in the game? Alive, he could at least serve as some sort of bargaining chip. Dead, he was just so much baggage.

Such thinking made sense to Spaceman.

Of course, he wasn't a homicidal maniac and maybe if he were, he'd figure things differently. But a man had to have hope.

McGannon passed him in the hallway. "What's up?"

"Probably nothing," he hedged.

The lieutenant eyed him. "You will let the rest of us in on it, won't you? If it turns into something?"

"Sure," he said.

Which was a lie, of course.

Too many people had died already because of him. All

they had to do now was hit the place with a SWAT team, or half the damned department, and Maguire would be a dead man before anybody got close. Maybe he didn't like the idea of having a partner, damn it, but he did have one and no bastard like Tom Hitchcock was going to kill him.

Like old Sam Spade said: "When a man's partner is killed, he's supposed to do something about it." Except that Spaceman was going to do something beforehand. And he was going to do it alone.

This was a one man show and he was the fucking star.

Lainie Potter had the same coloring and slender form as her brother. She was about thirty-five, with a few lines around her soft eyes. A real grown-up woman that Spaceman thought might be worth knowing.

She answered the door wearing tight jeans and a man's shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Her hair was tucked under an old baseball cap and she was surprised to find another cop at her door.

She showed him into the living room, where boxes were sitting everywhere, half-filled. "Sit down, please. I've just been. . .sorting through things. Mostly just killing time." She grimaced. "That's a horrible phrase, isn't it? Anyway, the funeral is tomorrow, and I'm sort of at loose ends. No more family left." She looked around the room, almost as if to keep from looking at him. "This was always such a nice place."

"Miss Potter, does the name Holly Point mean anything to you?"

"Lainie, please." She sat cross-legged on a large leather hassock. "Sure. Now I remember. Holly Point is the place we had the picnic. We all piled into Jody's old truck and drove out there. Spent the whole day acting like a bunch of kids. It was all very dumb and very wonderful." She laughed softly at the memory and her eyes seemed lighter. "What a day. When Jody called before, he said it was such

a good day. I think Jerry probably felt the same way. I never saw him smile so much." Her fist clenched suddenly, and she pounded it against the arm of the chair. "Why do things have to get so horrible?"

"I don't know, Lainie."

Without warning, she was crying. "He was so good. So sweet. I don't understand why this had to happen to Jerry."

He sat awkwardly for a moment, then moved to put a careful arm around her, not saying anything, but just holding on.

After several minutes, the quiet crying ended. She pulled a wadded Kleenex out of her pocket and used it. "Damn. Sorry about that."

"You're entitled." He glanced at his watch. "Lainie, I'm going out to Holly Point now. I think that may be where Jody and his brother are."

"You're going alone?"

"Yes." He moved away again, sitting on the couch edge. "I'm just so damned tired of the dying. This whole thing is between Tom Hitchcock and me, and it's going to end now. Now, damn it."

"You're taking a dangerous chance."

He shook his head. "Not such a chance. Surprise is on my side. And besides, I won't be all on my own. I've got a back-up."

"Where?"

"Right here."

She looked around. "What?"

"You. At nine o'clock, if I haven't been in touch, call headquarters and ask for Lieutenant McGannon. Tell him where I've gone and why. Will you do that? I know damned well I've got no right to ask, but it would help."

"Of course I'll do it. I'm glad to know that the hero is alive and well in America."

He shook his head. "If you want heroes, watch television. I'm just a tired cop."

She walked to the door with him. "You'll be careful, won't you, Detective Kowalski?"

"Spaceman," he corrected. "And I'm always careful."

Chapter 37

BLUE dreamed that he fell through a time warp.

He fell and when he stopped falling, he was back in the camp in Nam. The end of it all, the coming home, the being a cop and all the rest he'd thought was real was nothing but fantasy.

The fucking VC guards came to look at him occasionally, once brought him food, but he couldn't eat. He just huddled in the corner and tried to stay sane. Sometimes he made faces at himself, wondering as he did when the hell they'd put mirrors all over the hut. Didn't make much sense, but he could dig it.

Suddenly, without warning, there was the crash of artillery fire very near by. The guards were all gone, probably in the shelter, and he was left all alone. There was another, even closer explosion.

Blue began to scream.

"What the hell is wrong with him?" Tommy complained. "He scared of a little thunder?"

Jody had soaked a handkerchief in the bottled water and he rubbed it on his face in an effort to cool off. "I think he's out of it. Whatever you gave him in the last shot."

"Yeah, maybe so." Tommy smiled and ruffled Jody's hair. "Almost over now. First thing in the morning I call Kowalski and set up a meet."

"How do you know he'll come?"

"He'll show. You think he wants his partner dead? If the pig thinks he can save Maguire by doing what I say, he'll do it. Kowalski is right in the palm of my hand." Tommy crushed the beercan he was holding.

Jody moved away, going to stand in the open doorway. "It won't help, will it?"

"What?"

"You're going to kill him anyway, right?" He spoke flatly.

"Sure. Have to. But not until Kowalski is here to watch. That's the fun part."

Jody was staring out into the early night sky, watching the boiling clouds. "Then what?" he said.

"What?"

"After you're all finished with Kowalski, then what the hell do we do next?"

"Whatever we want."

"What if there's nothing I want?"

Tommy walked over and stood behind him. "You're acting funny, Jody. Is anything wrong?"

"Is anything wrong? Are you serious?" Jody felt a sudden sadness sweep over him. He shook his head. "I think it's gonna rain any minute," he said. "Hope to hell it cools things off."

"Yeah." Tommy began to massage Jody's back. "Hey, you're all tense." He laughed softly. "Bet I know how to untense you."

Jody jerked away. "Not now," he said.

"Okay, sure." Tommy sounded surprised. His hands began to rub again. "Maybe you're right. We'll wait until this is all finished and then we'll have a big party. We'll find us a couple of nice kids and go to the beach. How about that?"

Jody was still watching the approaching storm. It was very close now. He thought he saw some headlights way down the road, but then decided it was only lightning. He raised his eyes to the sky again. "Why did you kill Jerry?"

The words were soft, said into the night, and he was surprised that they'd come from his mouth. He had been

silently screaming the question ever since he'd found out. Now the words were said.

Tommy's hands stopped rubbing, but stayed where they were. "How'd you find out? Did that bastard in there tell you?"

"It doesn't matter how I found out. What difference does it make?" Jody turned to face his brother. "Why, that's the question, why? Jerry was a good person. He loved me, that's all, and for that you killed him."

Tommy slapped him across the face. "Shut up. I did what I had to do. What right do you have to question it?"

Jody rubbed his cheek, staring at him. For the first time in his life, he didn't like the feelings he was having toward Tommy. It scared him to feel this way. He couldn't hate his brother, because Tommy was a part of him.

But Tommy killed Jerry.

Jody wanted just to turn and run into the darkness and hope that the storm would swallow him up. He wanted to disappear.

But he didn't.

Tommy pulled him into a tight hug. "I'm sorry if I did the wrong thing. I didn't mean to make you mad." He spoke softly into Jody's ear, the words falling like gentle touches. "I'm sorry."

Jody stood there for an endless moment and then he returned the hug. He did it because he felt like a man falling into a bottomless pit and he had to hold onto something.

He held onto Tommy because Tommy was there.

Spaceman left the car some distance from the park entrance. As he walked closer, he took the gun from its holster and held it loosely in one hand. The rain which had been threatening finally broke just as he reached the gate and slipped through. The skies opened up and let loose.

Perfect, he thought. Just fucking perfect.

So heavy was the rain that he couldn't see more than a foot in any direction. He kept moving anyway, toward the dimly defined shapes ahead.

He had a sudden flash of *déjà vu:* 1966. Nam. The fucking jungle in the rainy season. Some fun. A sharp crack of thunder made him jump, then he swore. Battle nerves. Killed a lot of grunts, nerves like that. Well, they weren't going to kill Spaceman Kowalski.

He wiped water from his eyes and peered straight ahead. Was that a light in the large building to the left? He decided it was, and moved in that direction. His hand, shoved into his jacket pocket now, was still wrapped around the gun.

By the time he reached the side of the building and pressed himself against it, Spaceman felt as if he'd spent a month in the monsoon. He edged toward the door. Through the crack of the opening, he could see a narrow shaft of light.

Spaceman stood very still for a moment, considering. He was going on a hunch, nothing more than that. Nothing less than that too, he reminded himself. Who the hell else would be out here in the middle of nowhere on a night like this?

It had to be Hitchcock in there and now was the time for action. Act first, think about it later.

He took a deep breath, said a prayer to whoever might be listening, and kicked the door open with his foot. He jumped in, landing on one knee, the gun raised. "Freeze," he screamed.

Spaceman's vision blurred as he saw his own image come back at him dozens of times. Then a shot sounded, very close by, and one of the images shattered. Spaceman fell to the floor and rolled until he hit the wall. He tried to focus, but the room was still filled with wavery reflections, and he didn't know where to fire. "Give it up, Hitchcock!" he yelled helplessly.

"Fuck you!" came the reply. The words were followed by another shot and more glass shattering.

Spaceman hugged the floor. He stayed there, trying to orient himself. Suddenly the light went out and he could hear the sound of fast-moving feet. After a moment, he started to crawl, hoping he was going in the right direction. Actually, he discovered that it was easier in the dark. The distorting mirrors no longer added their confusion.

He bumped into a wall, angled off slightly and kept going.

After only a couple of centuries of crawling, he made it to the door again. He pushed it open and slid down the wet ramp on his stomach. The rain had let up, and a sudden flash of lightning outlined three figures running across the compound. Actually, two were running and the third, bound hand and foot, was being dragged along.

"Stop!" Spaceman yelled again, but the word was swallowed up by the wind and rain. He started after them, slipping and stumbling in the mud.

They were already gone from sight, except for the pale glow of a flashlight. Then even that disappeared and Spaceman was alone.

He stood still and waited, not even breathing, until another flash of lightning illuminated the three figures again. They weren't running now, they were climbing. Already they were about halfway up the side of the ferris wheel, moving slowly from one car to the next, dragging Maguire behind.

Spaceman headed that way. When he was right underneath them, he looked up. "You can't get out that way, Hitchcock."

It sounded like Hitchcock said something in reply, but Spaceman couldn't make out the words. He just stood, waiting.

After threatening for so long and hitting so brutally, the storm seemed to have spent itself quickly. The rain just

stopped and some light began to show through the clouds. Instead of cooling things off, however, all it seemed to have done was make the world steam. Everything took on a dirty yellow glow.

Spaceman stepped back a little so he could see them better. They had climbed into a car. "This won't help, Tom," he said. In the sudden stillness, the words carried well. "Do you want to get yourself and your brother killed?"

"We're not scared. You make one move I don't like, and your partner'll do a swan dive. *Comprendé?*"

"Killing a cop is dumb, Tom."

"Fuck you."

Spaceman peered up through the pale light. "Blue? You okay?"

If there was an answer, he didn't hear it.

Spaceman tried another tactic. "Jody? Why don't you quit this now before it's too late? He killed Jerry, do you know that?"

"He knows. He doesn't care. Tell him that you don't give a damn, Jody."

Jody didn't say anything.

"I talked to Lainie, Jody. She wants it to work out okay for you. She knows that you didn't have anything to do with what happened to Jerry."

"Shut up!" Tom screamed suddenly. "Shut the fuck up, or I'll push this bastard over the side." He shoved Blue a little and the tied man swung precariously out of the car, held only by the rope in Tom's hand. Then he was yanked back into the seat.

"Stop!" Jody seemed to have finally found his voice. "Stop, Tommy, please. No more dying. I can't stand anymore dying."

"You siding with the pigs now, Jody? Turning against your own brother? You forgetting everything I've done for you?"

"I just want it to end. Now."

"It'll end when I say so."

Spaceman watched the small car move back and forth high in the air. "They're burying Jerry tomorrow, Jody. I think he'd like to have you there."

Above there was only silence. He could make out Jody and Tom, staring at one another.

"Frag the mutha' fuckers!" Blue yelled suddenly. "Frag the slanty-eyed mutha' fuckers!"

Tom, startled by the unexpected noise, dropped the rope. Instantly, Blue moved. There was only one way to go and he went. Over the side. He climbed out of the car and dangled there, holding onto the side with both hands.

"Hang on, Blue!" Spaceman yelled, stupidly.

"What the fuck else can I do?" Blue sounded drunk.

Tom was trying to pull Blue back into the car. Exasperated, he yanked out a gun and leaned over the side to press the barrel against Blue's head. "You bastard."

Spaceman was watching Tom. He never saw Jody move. Neither did his brother until it was too late. It was such a quick moment, just a shove, and it was done.

Tom screamed once sharply on the way down.

He hit against the concrete piling at the bottom of the ferris wheel. Then he was still.

Spaceman ran over and dropped to his knees beside the body, but there wasn't a thing he could do for Thomas Hitchcock. His neck had snapped. Spaceman stared at him for a moment, feeling a certain sense of justice inside. One part of him knew he shouldn't feel that way, but he did.

He jumped up and moved back out to where he could see the car overhead again. While Blue struggled to climb back into the violently rocking metal box, Jody was standing, one leg slung over the restraining bar.

Spaceman knew what was going to happen next. For one split moment, he wanted to let it just happen. That would

make a nice tidy end to this whole mess. Everybody could be done with it, except of course, for those in mourning.

But then he knew he couldn't let it just happen. "Don't jump, Jody. Please." He was sick and tired of death, too.

"Let me go," Jody pleaded, as if someone were actually holding him back. "It doesn't matter. Just let it be done."

"It matters to me. Enough, already. No more dead bodies."

Jody shook his head.

Blue was still trying to pull himself back into the car. "Jody," he said breathlessly. "Help me, please. I don't think I can make it."

"Let me die."

"Help me."

After another moment, Jody pulled his leg back. Then he reached over the side and helped Blue up into the car. Spaceman was already on his way up. After several treacherous minutes on the rain-slippery metal, he reached the car and managed to squeeze in. Nobody was getting out of the thing without help.

Blue was still dopey; his face was pale and his eyeballs kept disappearing. Still he managed a wobbly thumbs up.

Jody was between them, crying. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Spaceman didn't say anything. In the distance, he could hear the wail of sirens and see flashing lights. Lainie had come through.

He relaxed into the gentle rocking of the car.

Chapter 38

"I SHOULD lift your shield," McGannon said. "For being such a stupid asshole."

It was one of the milder things he had said in the last forty minutes. Spaceman, wearing a sweatsuit from his locker, just nodded. He'd been sitting across from the infamous desk, nodding, for a long time.

McGannon seemed to run out of steam suddenly. "Get the hell out of here," he said wearily. "Before I lose my temper."

Spaceman got up and shuffled to the door. It was already well into the next day and he hadn't had any sleep.

"Spaceman—"

"Huh?"

"Good work."

He lifted his hand a few inches in acknowledgement and left. He didn't know whether he should turn right or left. He tossed a mental coin, dropped it, and went left. He stood outside the interrogation room. Through the one-way window, he could see Jody, his head resting on the table. With him was a broad from the public defender's office. She wasn't having any better luck with Jody than had Spaceman or the other detectives. He had just clammed up, withdrawn into his own private hell.

Spaceman sighed and shook his head. Later for Jody. He turned in time to see Blue enter the room. Dressed in jeans and a tee shirt, Maguire was still white and his hands seemed to be shaking a little, but he smiled faintly in greeting.

"You hanging tough?" Spaceman said.

"Oh, sure." He inclined his head toward the window. "Sad."

"Yeah, maybe." Spaceman was tired of sad. "You sure that you don't belong in the hospital?"

"I'm sure. The doc cleared me. He suggested a cup of tea and bed. I suggested a couple drinks and bed. We compromised. One drink and bed."

"Okay. I'm buying."

They started out.

"Kowalski!" It was McGannon's voice.

Spaceman sighed. "Shit, I thought he was done with me for a while." He turned. "Yeah?"

"Into my office."

They both started in. McGannon stopped Blue. "This is personal for Kowalski," he said, not rudely.

Blue and Spaceman glanced at each other. Spaceman shrugged. "Maguire's okay," he said.

McGannon just nodded and went behind his desk. "It's about your son," he said.

Spaceman's stomach did a minor flip-flop; that was all he could manage at the moment. "What about him?"

McGannon seemed fascinated by the grain of the wood in the top of his desk. "Kowalski, he was arrested this morning."

"Busted? What for?" Spaceman closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Seems like he's the one been setting the fires in the hills. Some county guys caught him in the act, and he apparently confessed to the whole thing. They're holding him at Parker Center."

Spaceman didn't say anything for several long moments. Then he stood. "Okay. Thanks for telling me. Come on, Maguire, I owe you a drink."

They walked out of the building and across the street without saying anything. Not until they were sitting in the back of the Lock-up, with drinks in front of them, did Spaceman break the silence. "What the fuck am I gonna do?" he said.

Blue took a careful sip of the drink, testing the booze, or maybe his own ability to handle it. "What do you want to do?"

"Something. Kill the little son of a bitch. Yell. Something."

"Yelling would be fine, I guess. A real fatherly thing to do."

Spaceman hit the table suddenly, with the palm of his hand. "Why the hell would he do something like this?"

Blue felt way out of his depth; what did he know about trying to raise a kid? All he had to go by was the example of his own father. "I don't know, Spaceman," he said. "I suppose he felt like he had reasons."

"Reasons? What kind of reasons can there be for something like this? Shit." Briefly, he was sullenly quiet. Then he said, "Well, it's his mess, damn it. To hell with it. I'm tired. Let his mother do the handholding."

"You don't mean that."

"Don't I?"

"He's your son. Give him a chance."

But Spaceman shook his head.

Blue frowned, but kept his mouth shut.

At last, Spaceman sighed deeply and rubbed his eyes. "I better haul my ass down to Parker," he said. "See the boy."

"Yeah, I think that sounds like a good idea," Blue said carefully.

"You get home okay?"

"No problem. I'll see you later."

Spaceman glanced at his watch and seemed just barely

able to make out the time. "The Potter funeral is at three. I want to make that."

"Any special reason?"

He shook his head. "No good reason. I just want to be there. The sister might like to have somebody there."

Blue looked at him. "Okay. Pick me up. I'll go along."

"Whatever." Spaceman was quiet again for a moment. "Do me a favor," he said then.

"Sure."

"Call the Lompoc department and find out about the boy up there. I'd like to know who he was." A fleeting smile crossed Spaceman's face. "No good reason for that, either." No matter what Karen said, he couldn't seem to stop hurting, to stop bleeding. And no matter what she thought, he bled for his own son as much as all the others.

"I'll do it," Blue said. "I'll find out about the boy."

"Thanks." Spaceman stood, and Blue waited, thinking the other man had more to say. But then he just shook his head a little and left the bar.

When he finally did get home, Blue couldn't sleep. He sat in front of the window, looking out over the city and drinking a glass of flat ginger ale. Behind him, the police radio chattered on softly. There wasn't much going on, which suited him fine.

The damned cat had returned, and was even deigning to keep him company for the moment. Pretty soon, he'd have to stir himself and get dressed for the funeral, but for right now, he was free to sit and do nothing.

It wasn't a bad way to spend some time.

Bleeding Hearts, a touching and powerful novel of friendship, murder, and all-consuming love, is the second novel by Teri White, the Edgar Allan Poe Award-winning author of *Triangle*.

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